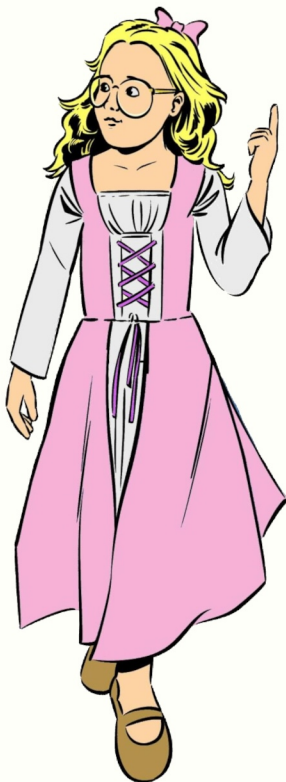


EXCELLENT!

The **ADVENTURES** *of*
PHILIP & SOPHIE
The Sword of the Dragon King

\$10

BY DREW ELDRIDGE



**DOUBLE
FEATURE!**

**WESTER
TALES**

No 1 & 2

The Adventures of Philip and Sophie
The Sword of the Dragon King

DOUBLE FEATURE

By Drew Eldridge

Westertales 2025

Copyright © 2025 by Westertales. All rights reserved.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, business, events and incidents are the products of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review. Illustrations have been purchased by the author for personal and commercial use.

Website: www.westertales.com

Email: contact@westertales.com

ISBN 978-1-0690203-0-7

*In memory of James Bates
For all your encouragement over the years.*

Table of Contents

Prologue -	The Argument ~1
Chapter 1 -	The Mysterious Creature ~6
Chapter 2 -	The Black Beard Gang ~13
Chapter 3 -	The Battle in the Life Tree and the Very Severe Beating of the Ape Bullies ~23
Chapter 4 -	Old Black Beard Surrenders ~29
Chapter 5 -	The Journey Home ~33
Chapter 6 -	Lumpy's Family ~40
Chapter 7 -	Henry the Bear ~46
Chapter 8 -	The Tunnel to Snake Valley ~53
Chapter 9 -	Henry's Surprise ~59
Chapter 10 -	The Fall ~69
Chapter 11 -	Henry Changes ~75
Chapter 12 -	The Cave ~83
Chapter 13 -	Sophie, the Magical Girl from Nibelheim ~97
Chapter 14 -	Perfect Pancakes—and Other Mysteries ~103
Chapter 15 -	An Unexpected Guest ~107
Chapter 16 -	The Man from the Sea ~111
Chapter 17 -	The Escape Plan ~117
Chapter 18 -	Getting Ready for Church ~123
Chapter 19 -	The Stranger in the Manger ~127
Chapter 20 -	Queer Happenings ~136
Chapter 21 -	Shortcut to the Village Square ~144
Chapter 22 -	A Place of Light and Song ~149
Chapter 23 -	Visions ~155
Chapter 24 -	Sophie's New Enterprise ~162
Chapter 25 -	The Sword of the Dragon King ~172
Chapter 26 -	Farewell to the Forest ~191
Chapter 27 -	The Legend of the First Labor ~198

THRILLING!
The **ADVENTURES** *of*
PHILIP & SOPHIE
The Sword of the Dragon King

\$10

BY DREW ELDRIDGE



*Fun for the
whole family!*

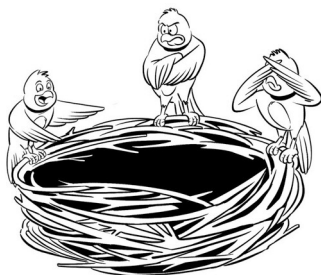
JAN.17
2025

**WESTER
TALES**

No 1

Prologue

The Argument



Every morning, when the sun rose and a gentle breeze brought up the scent of lilies, a little bird named Sebastian Ploomberry would wake up, shake out his little feathers, stretch his little legs, and peer down over the edge of his little nest. He had been practicing all summer for what was to be the most exciting moment of his life: the moment when, for the very first time, he would get to spread out his wings and fly.

“Alright,” he repeated to himself confidently. “Just like we rehearsed. Feet tucked . . . back straight . . . beak pointed to where I want to go . . . and wings up-down, up-down!”

As Sebastian said this, he hopped up onto the ledge and began readying himself by pacing back and forth and taking a series of deep little breaths.

“Oh bother! Why does it have to be so high up?” he exclaimed. “I shall surely break my head if I fall! Then what would become of me?”

The sun seemed much brighter to Sebastian suddenly, and the wind felt much stronger. If any other little bird had been in his place, they would have more than likely gotten scared and turned back. But Sebastian was different from most other little birds—braver and more curi-

ous. For better or worse, he was very often able to talk himself into such things, even if it got him into trouble.

"No! No! No!" he shouted. "I'm not going to chicken out again! Not *this* time! Not *this* bird! I'm going over, and that's all there is to it!"

Sebastian then took a *very* deep breath (a breath so deep, in fact, that it made him look like he was about to burst or blow up into a puff of feathers), bent his knees, and began to count down backwards from three.

"If I do that," he thought to himself, "then perhaps it will be like someone is here with me cheering me on . . . Three! Two! One!" he counted. But it didn't work. It was still too scary! He couldn't move and felt very disappointed in himself. "Oh, dear . . ." he sighed.

But then Sebastian had another idea. One he was sure would work!

"Oh! Oh! I know! Perhaps if I close my eyes as I count . . . Yes, that should do it!" he thought. "You can't get scared if you can't see!" Once more, he started counting. "Three! Two! One!" But the same thing happened again. What was he going to do? He was out of ideas.

"Oh well," he lamented. "I'll just have to do it the old-fashioned way, I guess. No tricks! No funny business!" He cleared his throat and prepared himself one last time. "Ahem, ahem! Wings, don't fail me!" he cried out to the heavens. "Wind, lift me up! And . . . as for the rest of the world . . ." Sebastian was hurrying now because he realized he was stalling again. "Here . . . I . . . come!"

And with that, Sebastian yelled out the word "Go!" as loud as he could—and plunged himself forward with all his might! A cold gust of wind then burst up from under him and thrust his whole body into the air! He lost his balance for a moment, and the sun's bright beams nearly blinded him, but he managed to straighten himself out.

"I'm doing it!" he exclaimed, flapping his little wings.

"I'm flying! I'm really flying! How delightful! How wonderful! How—"

But before Sebastian could finish what he was going to say, he felt a firm clamp upon the tip of his little tail and a strong tug backward—pulling him, in fact, right straight back to the place where he began. It was his older sister.

"Ouch! What was that for?" Sebastian whimpered, as he landed on his back with a thud.

"For your own good, that's what!" his sister replied. "Just where do you think you were going?"

"I was *going* to fly," said Sebastian, "until *you* interrupted me. It's boring here! There's nothing to do!"

Sebastian spoke as though he had been awakened from the most wonderful dream he had ever had, and was now being jostled out of bed. He stood up and began brushing himself off very grumpily.

"What do you mean there's nothing to do?" said his sister. "I play with you, don't I?"

"Yes, yes, but you're a girl! All girls ever want to do is play 'nest' or sing! And Edward is always out helping Mother." Sebastian huffed. "Well, I for one have seen enough of nests for now. It's high time I discover something new!"

The place Sebastian was referring to, and which he kept pointing at with his wing as he spoke, was the great green forest beyond the Ploomberry nest—a valley that was very old, very mysterious, and full of many wondrous spectacles. Every day, Sebastian would imagine himself exploring them.

"First," he would say to himself, as he held out his wing and squinted, "to the great snowy mountain to the East! And then to the rushing rivers! And then—" if that wasn't enough, and if he "had time," as he always added, "—to one of the many tall roaring waterfalls with rainbows over them!"

Sebastian's nest was in the Life Tree. It was the tallest

of all the trees in the great valley and was right in the middle. That meant he had the best view. In every direction, there was something wonderful to look at. He used to day-dream about what might be there. Sebastian saw adventure! Excitement! But all Dorabella saw was trouble.

"You're too little," she continued in that tone that big sisters so love to lecture their little brothers in. "Your wings aren't long enough. Your beak is too short. And you don't even—"

"Ah, fooey!" said Sebastian. "I would have made it . . ."

"Made it where, Sebastian? I still don't understand. What is it you want to do down there anyway?"

He didn't even have to think about it.

"Why, go on an adventure, of course! Just like the mysterious—"

But then Sebastian was interrupted again, this time by his older brother bird, who had just flown down and landed behind him.

"Oh, don't tell me he's prattling on about that old peacock's tale again," the voice sneered. "Really, Dorabella, you should not be encouraging him."

Now, as you know, reader, you should never, ever try to hit one of your brothers or sisters, even when they say something mean you don't like. It's always better to use words to solve problems, or to call a grown-up and let them sort it out. I'm very sorry to say, however, that young Sebastian did not do this. Instead, he lost his temper and charged forth towards his brother, intent on dealing a most severe pecking! And his brother, too, did the same! Fortunately, their sister managed to get between them just in time.

"Now enough of that, you two! I said enough!"

"He started it!" cried Sebastian.

"I don't care who started it," Dorabella responded. "And you, Edward, stop behaving like such a child!"

“I’m only trying to teach the kid a lesson! The sooner he grows up and faces the truth, the better.”

Sebastian then scowled at his brother and stuck his tongue out. So did Edward.

“Stop it!” Dorabella got between them. “I’ll tell Mother! I will!” They stopped immediately. “What in the world are you two arguing about anyway?”

“Nothing,” grumbled Edward.

Sebastian clearly disagreed.

“It’s *not* nothing!” he corrected. “The whole forest is talking about it, sis! Something extraordinary has happened!”

“What’s happened?” she asked.

“There’s a *new* creature! A powerful one! Who fights on OUR side!”

Chapter 1

The Mysterious Creature

The forest was divided into the strong and the weak—and the weak were always preyed upon by the strong. That’s why the news was so hard for everyone to believe. But the news was spreading fast. All the little chicks were chirping about it:

*There is a creature,
Big and strong,
Chirp, chirp!
Who was once very naughty,
and did much wrong.
Chirp! Chirp!
Until one day,
The creature switched sides.
Chirp!
Now our protector,
Guardian of nests, trees and hives . . .*

“The Legend of the Seven Labors” was what the chicks were all calling it—“seven” being the number of evil king-animals the creature had de-throned. Sebastian Ploomberry was one of these little chicks. He had memorized every riddle and song about the creature and hoped one day to join him. Either that, or become a hero himself and have his own adventures. But his brother didn’t believe it was really true and his sister was only learning about the legend for the first time. If he could only convince her, then maybe she would let him go. In his best storyteller’s voice, he began reciting the tale.

“He wanders around, they say . . . getting into adventures! Rescuing . . . fighting battles . . . chasing villains . . .” As he spoke, he sawed through the air with his wing like a sword, making swish sounds: “taking from the rich . . .

giving to the poor . . . and protecting the weak from the powerful!”

But Edward wasn’t about to let him get away with it. He thought the story was silly.

“And who has hands, but no claws . . .” he interrupted sarcastically. “Skin, but no fur or feathers . . . And who can go invisible, weave spider webs, and fly without having any wings! Right!?”

Edward crossed his arms and rolled his eyes.

“That’s right!” answered Sebastian confidently. “Except about the fur part. It does have fur, so I’ve heard—only it’s all on the top of its head, rather than its body—”

“Oh, how convenient!” harped back Edward. He was so annoying. “Of course! Its fur is all on its head! How silly of me! By my beak—the next thing you’ll be telling us is that this creature who wanders about doesn’t even have a tail!”

“Actually,” replied Sebastian, closing his eyes and pointing upward, “that is the next thing I was about to mention . . .”

Edward finally snapped. You could tell, because all his feathers began to stand up like a porcupine. He didn’t like it when Sebastian told these kinds of stories. He thought they were dangerous. They made impressionable little birds want to go on adventures—which was a very good way of getting eaten up.

“That’s it!” Edward cried out, flapping his wings. “I have heard enough of this nonsense, Sebastian! There is no such creature! And there will be no more talk of it! Or of any other silly story you’ve made up! And that’s that!”

But Sebastian would not be silenced. It was too important to him.

“You believe me, don’t you, sis?” he asked as he hopped over and began tugging on her wing.

But Dorabella still wasn’t sure.

"I don't know, Sebastian," she replied. "It does sound awfully far-fetched . . ."

She believed it was a dangerous idea too.

"And no adventures either!" Edward added with a scoff. "I'm the oldest! I know best! And I say that's the new rule! You only want to go on one, anyway, because you are young! *You* don't know what it was like before we built this place! How hard life was! How much was lost!"

Sebastian hated it when people brought up his age in a bad way—as if everything he said was automatically wrong merely because of his small stature. Besides, what was wrong with adventures? They were dangerous? So what? He didn't care. It was a lot better, in his opinion, than sitting around in a boring old nest or looking for worms all day. But Edward clearly didn't get it.

"And you don't know what it's like," Sebastian fired back angrily, "not to know what it was like! Being cooped up all day, where nothing important or exciting ever happens! And never having anything interesting to say to anyone, apart from what others have done or what goes on below. You had an adventure helping find the Life Tree. Why can't I have one of my own? And why can't it be even grander!?" They were both so loud that many of the other birds from the other nests were beginning to listen in, too. "I want to have my own story," Sebastian continued, "to be remembered for doing something!"

"We are doing something," said Edward grumpily. "We're surviving! Trust me when I say that's as good as it gets."

"Ah, fooey!" said Sebastian again, this time with a pout. "That's all you ever say! But you don't know that. You don't know anything!"

"I know that if you leave, you'll die," said Edward sternly. "How would you like to be remembered for that, little brother? And for your sister's death, too, when she comes to rescue you? Or, while you're at it, why not drag

the whole nest down with you? That would be an interesting story!”

Sebastian was now fuming. If you could have seen beneath his feathers, he would have been a bright hot red color. If he had had fists, they would have been clenched with fury.

“I never said anyone had to come after me!”

“But they will. You do know that, don’t you?”

“Well . . . that’s their problem then! Either way, it would be a lot better than staying here! I hate this place!” he growled. “And I hate both of you!”

A quiet sadness fell over all who were listening in the tree—especially Dorabella—and Sebastian immediately regretted saying that.

“Oh great . . . great . . .” he thought to himself, feeling perfectly rotten. “Now look what I’ve done! Me and my big beak!”

He crossed his wings and huffed as everyone looked at him with disappointment. Sebastian knew he had to apologize. Nevertheless, he still didn’t feel like Edward, Dorabella or anyone else understood him. And it was very frustrating. Now that he had everyone’s attention, maybe he could finally explain.

“Listen,” he continued. “I’m sorry for what I said. I didn’t mean that. I was just angry, that’s all. I do like it here. Of course I do! It’s my home! All I’m trying to say is that . . . well . . .” Sebastian hopped up onto the ledge and pointed to the great valley again. “Maybe there is more out there for us! You know? That . . . maybe building a nest and being safe is only a part of life—or a first step to something bigger!”

All of the birds in the tree looked at each other confused. Something more? Bigger? What in the world was Sebastian talking about?

“You mean . . . like a bigger nest?” Dorabella asked curiously.

"Maybe," Sebastian answered. "Sure!"

It wasn't exactly what he himself had in mind—but hey, at least it was something. At least they were thinking about it. Dorabella suddenly seemed interested. All of the birds did. They each spent a moment or two pondering it. Even Edward. Maybe Sebastian was right. Maybe there was more to life for a bird. And maybe there really was a hero creature. Sebastian smiled, feeling like he was finally getting through to them. But then something happened.

"Well, we shall know soon enough," said Edward. "If you are right, Sebastian, then I suppose we're in for quite the show this morning . . ."

"What do you mean?" asked Sebastian. "A show? What kind of show?" And what did it have to do with adventures or the mysterious creature? Dorabella was wondering too. Everyone was.

"What kind do you think?" Edward continued. "It's why I've flown back so early. I was going to tell you right away, but you kept arguing with me. The Black Beard Gang is headed this way."

"What? What did you just say!?" Sebastian yelled, panicking. "The Black Beards are coming? That's what you've been waiting to tell us this whole time? Are you crazy!?"

The Black Beards, reader, were a gang of some of the most mean and nasty apes in the whole forest. They stole, bullied, kidnapped and sometimes even killed other animals for fun! They hadn't been seen in the Life Tree for several months, and the birds there were just beginning to feel safe again. But now it seemed like everyone's worst nightmares had come true. As you would expect, the whole place broke into a panic.

"Coo! Coo!" the pigeons sang frantically. "The apes are back! The apes are back! What are we going to doOoOo!"

“Chip, chip! Chip, chip! Chip, chip!” said the squirrels.

And all the little chipmunks began hoarding as many acorns in their cheeks as they could before hiding. Sebastian was speechless.

“Quiet, please!” called out Edward, trying to calm everyone down. “Chirping about it is not going to help!”

Poor Dorabella looked more worried than anyone. She was barely able to speak without trembling.

“Are you sure you saw them?” she squeaked timidly. “Are you sure it was the Black Beard Gang?”

“Positive,” said Edward.

“How many?”

“That depends if you include the captives . . .”

“They have captives!?” Sebastian shouted.

“Three,” replied Edward, “of the Brumbledumb family.”

The Brumbledumbs were another group of apes who lived in the forest—who the Black Beard Gang often picked on for being weaker. By the sounds of it, the Black Beard Gang had just finished raiding the Brumbledumbs’ home and were now returning to the Life Tree to celebrate.

“But how many of the gang are coming?” Dorabella shrieked.

Neither of the two brothers had ever seen their sister so distraught before.

“What does it matter how many?” replied Edward. “There’s a hero who’s going to save us all! Right, Sebastian?”

But Sebastian didn’t seem very sure anymore.

“Well, what’s wrong?” Edward teased. Then he laughed at his little brother. And it was precisely this laughing that made Sebastian do what he did next. Amidst the panic, he hopped up onto a branch overhead. And then to another one!

“Oh, Sebastian!” Dorabella cried. “Where are you going?”

When he reached the top of the tree, he flapped his wings and yelled as loud as he could so all could hear:

“Yes! He WILL come! You’ll see!” All of the animals stopped panicking and looked up at him. “I know you don’t believe, Edward! But you’re wrong! The mighty creature IS real! He WILL COME. He’ll come—and he’ll SAVE US ALL!”

The whole tree shook with cheers after Sebastian said this, much to Edward’s annoyance. In fact, there was so much cheering that some of the nests even came close to tumbling right off their branches. Sebastian had to be very careful getting back down and nearly started fighting with his brother again. But it all came to an end when another even louder sound was suddenly heard. A familiar sound that all animals in the tree dreaded.

“Shh! Did you hear that?” cried Dorabella.

Everyone listened.

Boom . . .

Boom . . .

Boom . . .

“Ooh Ahh . . .”

“Ooh Ahh . . .”

“Ooh Ahh . . .”

Boom!

Boom!

“Ooh Ahh!”

“Ooh Ahh!”

The Black Beard Gang had returned . . .

Chapter 2

The Black Beard Gang



When Sebastian, Dorabella and Edward heard the horrible Black Beard Gang approaching, they hopped over to the edge of their nest and peeked down quietly together.

“Do you think they’ll find us?” whispered Dorabella.

“They’ve never found us before,” said Edward. “But there is no guarantee they won’t find us this time.”

“I wish they would just leave us alone!” pouted Sebastian. “It’s not fair that they pick on us. We don’t bother them!”

“Of course it’s not fair, Sebastian,” his sister lamented. “But that’s the way life is in the forest. Some are strong and some are weak. Some get to eat and some get eaten. We just have to accept it and keep hiding.”

Sebastian and Edward frowned. They didn’t like hearing it, but the truth was their sister was right. In this forest, there was no justice. There were no police officer animals. There were no courts or judges. There was nothing at all—nothing but bullies competing to see who could be the cruelest. For whoever was cruelest was always the most feared in the forest. And whoever was most feared could always get their way. The leader of the Black

Beard Gang, Old Black Beard himself, was just one of many who were trying to fight their way to the top.

“Out of’r way, ye scoundrels!” they yelled as they swung into the great tree. “Ooh Ahh! Ooh Ahh!”

“Make way for the king of the forest!”



They did everything they could to make sure everyone was miserable, terrorizing all who stood in the way. Nests were smashed to pieces! Branches were torn down! The beautiful white bark was smeared with mud. Laughing, they spat at and kicked animals out of the tree. One little tree frog got the worst of it, reader. An ape reached into its little house hole, dragged it out by its legs, spun it around and threw it so far and so high that it seemed to disappear into the clouds! Fortunately for our little friend, however, it ended up falling safely onto a lily-pad in a nearby pond.

“Monsters!” cried young Sebastian, as he watched helplessly. He imagined himself being much bigger and liked it. “Why, if only I were an eagle, I would swoop down and peck those big bullies’ brains out! That would teach them! And then! Mmmm-mm-mm-mm-mm-mm!”

Sebastian was trying to say, “and then lift them up high and drop them,” but couldn’t because Dorabella had covered his mouth with her wing.

“Shh! They’ll hear you!”

The family of birds, in what was once a cozy and safe nest, looked down together at the mayhem the tree was now in, searching and searching for the captives Edward had seen. Sure enough, there they were on one of the branches, huddling and shivering together. But there was also something familiar about them. Sebastian leaned forward and squinted.

“Wait a minute!” he said, breaking away from his sister’s grasp. “That’s Lumpy! And his friends! He often climbs up here and plays with me!”

“Sebastian Ploomberry!” said Dorabella. “You should not be playing with strange apes like that!”

“Lumpy’s not strange,” Sebastian replied. “Not all apes are bad, you know. The Brumbledumbs are kind and gentle.”

“It’s true,” spoke another softer voice coming from behind all three of the birds. They spun around and looked up—and there on a branch they saw a butterfly and a squirrel.

“The Brumbledumbs,” said the butterfly, ever so softly, the way a butterfly would, “are a noble family who never try to hurt or steal from anyone. Your brother is perfectly safe around them. I assure you.”

“That’s right!” the squirrel added, in a squeakier and somewhat, I dare say, cheekier sounding voice. “Especially Lumpy!”

“Are you two leaving the tree?” asked Edward.

“That’s the plan,” replied the squirrel with a chirp. “We’re going to live down by the waterfall, where it’s safe.”

“You should come with us,” said the butterfly.

Edward gasped.

“The waterfall? Are you kidding?”

“That’s where the tiger lives!” said Dorabella. “You’ll be eaten for sure!”

"Not anymore, it doesn't," the squirrel replied "Word has it, the tiger has been . . . taken care of . . . and that the animals there now roam freely and safely."

"Really?" Dorabella and Edward gasped.

"Mmmhmm."

Sebastian's feathers pricked up in excitement and he burst past his sister from behind her.

"Ah-hah!" he cried out. "Mysterious disappearances! I told you HE was real, Edward! I told you!"

"Ah, so you've heard about it too, I see," said the squirrel, scratching his chin.

"Heard about it?" said Edward, rolling his eyes. "It's all the kid ever chirps about! Hero this! And savior that! I really wish he'd just—"

Sebastian cut him off before he could finish.

"Did you see him!? What did he look like? No tail or fur, right!?"

"Mmm . . . no . . . I didn't see him," answered the squirrel. "But I know someone who did once . . ."

"Do you think he'll come?"

The squirrel and the butterfly looked at each other and shrugged.

"I hope he does," said Sebastian. He looked back down over the edge at poor Lumpy. "I know he will! He must!"

Speaking of Lumpy, reader, he was having quite the time down there as all this was happening, for he was not the sort of apeling who was captured so easily. One of the Black Beard apes learned that when they tried to eat him.

"Yarr! How'd ye like to be my dinner! Mmm! Yum, yum! Tasty!"

It reached out with its long arms and snagged Lumpy's ankle. It picked him up and brought him right up close to its big, ugly face, where he could smell its rotten breath.



“YeEeEe. . .” the beast croaked slowly, glaring at him. “Ye will be tasteYyYy . . .”

Everyone who was watching thought Lumpy was a goner for sure—especially his two friends, who were each so scared they could hardly even stand. But Lumpy managed to struggle free.

“Ouch! Ouch! Ouch!” yelped the Black Beard ape. “That little bugger bit me!”

Lumpy stuck his tongue out at him.

That was about when all the ruckus ended, and the evil king ape finally emerged, calling for everyone to stop. He had the blackest and bushiest of all the beards and wore a string of leaves around his head. His voice was scary, but intelligent-sounding—rolling his r’s and stretching out words, almost like singing.

“Enough! There shall be no eating of the spoils! These meddling rrr-rascals must suffah a different fate! Gather rrr-ound then, everrr-yone and listen to what I sayYyYy!”

The Black Beard Gang did as they were told. When everyone had settled and the tree was quiet, he cleared his throat and addressed them. Sebastian, Dorabella and Edward watched from above.

“Brrr-others!” he yelled. “Countrymen! Comrrr-ades! Today has been a grrr-eat victory for the Black Beards! We have conquered the territory of the tortoises! Swept thrrr-ough the valley of the so-called vulture king! And have crrr-ushed all who have stood in our way! The forrr-est belongs to us now! Ooh Ahh! Ooh Ahh!”

The gang erupted in applause, cheering and beating their chests.

“Ooh Ahh! Ooh Ahh! Ooh Ahh!”

Oh, the nerve they had in saying that, reader! It made all of the other animals feel so angry! They didn’t belong to him! And neither did their homes! But, on the other hand, that was the rule, wasn’t it? With no one around to stop them, the strongest got to do what they wanted. When the cheering finally ended, he continued.

“But our work is not over, com-rrrades! No! For although we have achieved victory, there still rrr-emain some who rrr-esist us! Animals like the DUMB DUMB family, who grrr-eedily store up bananas, and try to hide them when it’s time to share! Liars! Cheaters! Frauds! All of them! How dare they not share, comrades! Ooh Ahh! Ooh Ahh! How dare they not share!” More cheers followed. It was so loud that the rabbits had to fold down their ears. “Which is why, comrades, we have captured three apelings of the DUMB DUMB family! To make an example of them—so they never trrr-y it again! And to rrr-eminde all of you other pathetic crrr-eatures listening what will happen to you too . . . if you choose to rrr-esist us, as well! Ooh Ahh!”

The Black Beard Gang cheered for a third time, repeating the king like parrots and drumming on the branches. It could be heard for miles throughout the

whole valley and made all of the weaker animals despair. But then everyone suddenly heard another, very different voice coming from somewhere in the back row. One of the Black Beard gang seemed nervous about something—perhaps even scared.

“B-b-but!” the voice stuttered. “W-w-what about . . . the . . . the . . . Phantom Ape? I’ve heard it e-e-eats a-a-animals who hurt others like that . . .”

He kept looking over his shoulder as he spoke, like something might be lurking behind him. Then some of the other Black Beards started to.

“Yes, I’ve heard that too!” one whispered.

“Isn’t that what happened to Johnny?”

“I heard it breathes fire!”

“I heard it walks on water!”

“I heard it—”

And so on. It was clear, reader, that Old Black Beard had completely lost control of his gang. He clenched his fists and growled in frustration. Only our young Sebastian seemed to know what everyone was suddenly so worried about.

“Phantom Ape?” he thought as he listened. “I wonder if that’s the Black Beard Gang’s name for . . . Yes, it must be!”

Old Black Beard snarled and sneered some more. Then, he shouted to get everyone’s attention. It was the second time that week the mysterious creature was mentioned, and it was beginning to get on his nerves.

“Enough! Silence! Order!” he shrieked, flinging about his arms. “Do not be fooled by these stories you have heard about phantom apes! They are all lies! Lies, I tell you! Do you hear me? ‘Tis a myth! A legend! Common fables, made up by the weak crrr-eatures to make themselves feel better as we rule them! And that’s all! Yes! The only ape anyone needs to be afrrr-aid of is me! ME! And

today I shall prrr-ove it to you once and for all. Brrr-ing out the Stomper!”

The animals all looked at each other, wondering what he meant.

“Hmm? Prove it?” they whispered.

“The Stomper? Who’s that?”

Even Sebastian didn’t know.

“Oh, I’ve got a bad feeling about this . . .” sighed Dorabella.

Then, everyone heard a loud sound they recognized from before.

Boom . . .

Boom . . .

Boom . . .

“Ooh Ahh! Ooh Ahh!”

Boom!

Boom!

“Ooh Ahh! Ooh Ahh!”

“What was that?” said Edward. “An elephant? A hippopotamus?”

No one seemed to know but the Black Beard Gang, who all started smiling and laughing again.

“Ooh Ahh! Ooh Ahh!”

“Bah hah hah hah! This will be good!”

“Yes! The Stomper is coming! Muah hah hah!”

And then they saw it, reader! The biggest, strongest, ugliest ape ever to walk in that wild valley, swinging through the branches toward the Life Tree.

“By my tail! Do you see the size of that thing?” Sebastian yelled. “Lumpy! Look out! Run away! Hurry!”

When the beast landed onto the branch that Lumpy and his friends were on, it felt like an earthquake. The whole tree shook and trembled. Lumpy sat at the giant’s feet, each of which were bigger than he was! Drooling, cross-eyed and laughing the stupidest-sounding laugh you have ever heard, he looked down at them and smiled.



“Ho! Ho! Ho! . . . Hoo! Hoo! Hoo! . . . Ho! Ho! . . . Ho! Ho! . . . Me, Stomper! Me hungry. Me stomp on little apes and make food. Ooh Ahh! Ooh Ahh! Ho! Ho! Ho! Who shall I stomp first? This one? That one? Or this little runt right here! Ho! Ho!”

Lumpy gulped again, for of the three captive apes “the littlest” was in fact him. And this time he was too scared to try and run away or fight.

“No matter,” grunted the giant. “I can stomp all of ‘em at once, they’re so tiny . . . Ho! Ho! Ho! Ho!”

The king laughed together with Stomper. So did the rest of the gang. It made the birds, squirrels and everyone else feel like it was even more hopeless.

Desperately, Sebastian looked around for the hero he believed in, but there was still no sign of any.

“Blast! Where is he!? They don’t have much time!”

"Now," announced Old Black Beard proudly. "Let this be a reminder to all of you weak cr-r-reatures!" He raised his hand, preparing to give Stomper the signal to crush the apelings. "And a lesson for your children—and your children's children—about what happens when you step out of your place, and forget that your r-r-role in the forest is to serve animals like me! Bah, hah hahhah! Drum roll, please!"

The Black Beard Gang all started beating chests, laughing and cheering.

"It's a shame," said Edward, sadly. "I really liked Lumpy and his friends. I only wish I could have had the chance to say goodbye to them . . ."

"Oh Lumpy," added Sebastian, about to break into tears. "I'm so sorry. Goodbye, my friend . . ."

Dorabella covered her eyes.

"I can't watch!"

As Old Black Beard raised his hand to give the signal, Stomper lifted his foot and held it over the helpless apelings, who hugged each other one last time. Old Black Beard dropped his hand. The foot came crushing down. But just before it touched them, it suddenly stopped.

"Wait!" yelled Sebastian, throwing up his wings. Everyone looked up. Something was coming. It was fast, reader! And I mean, really fast! Swinging through the branches! It was getting close! "Wait, everyone! Look!" Sebastian pushed his brother aside and ran to the other edge of his nest. "Look! Look, everyone! Look up there! It's him! It's really him! Look! LOOK!"

The Black Beard Gang gazed in horror.

"Oh, no!" they groaned. "NO! It can't be! IT CAN'T BE!"

But it was. The Phantom Ape was real. And now, reader, it was their turn to be afraid.

Chapter 3

The Battle in the Life Tree and the Very Severe Beating of the Ape Bullies



It was just like out of one of Sebastian's day dreams. The action! The excitement! The surprises! The bad guys, who he'd always wished and hoped someone would stand up to, finally getting a taste of their own medicine!

The creature was about four feet tall, slender and upright. It wore a bright green tunic and cloak as black as night. Around its waist, was tied a golden sash with little pouches on the back.

"Run away!" cried the Black Beard Gang. "Run away! Run away!"

"Quick! Before it eats us! Don't you remember the stories?"

"I'm not staying to fight that thing! Forget it!"

But Old Black Beard wouldn't let them.

"You cowards!" he shouted down at them. "Don't be afrrr-aid! It's just one crrr-eature! Fight! Destroy him! That's an order! MAKE HIM SUFFAH!"

"Yes sir!" the bravest ones yelled back.

The mysterious creature, meanwhile, wasn't wasting

any time. As soon as it landed in the tree, it leaped down, drew a long pointed staff and delivered such a blow onto one poor ape's head that it went cross-eyed and straight to sleep, tumbling out of the tree, down into some mud.



“Oh yeah!” cried Sebastian, very impressed. “Pow! Right in the face! Did you see that?” He loved every minute of it.

Three more of the gang fell under our hero's staff after that. Smack! Thwack! Oof! Just like that! And when others tried to jump up onto the branch to tackle it, the mysterious creature batted them away like baseballs, one by one. No one had ever seen such skills before. Seventeen had already fallen out of the tree, and none of them looked like they were planning on climbing back up.

“Pow! Oh, yeah!” yelled Sebastian. “Bang! Yeah, get him! Woo! Oh yeah! Pow! Pow! Pow!”

Even Edward was getting into it. All of the animals were. Everyone except Dorabella, that is. She thought it was too violent for little chicks to watch and was trying to cover Sebastian's eyes.

"Oh, Mrs. Butterfly!" she lamented, hoping to get at least one animal on her side. "Isn't this simply awful?"

But the butterfly seemed to be enjoying it more than anyone.

"Kill!" she squeaked delightedly. "Kill! Kill! Kill! Muah, hah, hah! Give it to them! Like that! Hi-ya!"

"Oh goodness . . ." Dorabella sighed.

The hero spotted Lumpy and his friends and used its whip to swing down to save them. Stomper saw it coming and tried to stomp them first but wasn't fast enough. Before his foot came down, the mysterious creature managed to swoop under it and scoop them up. A very close call! It made everyone wonder even more about what kind of creature was under that hood.

"Wow! Look at him go!" Sebastian marvelled. "Did you see that long thing he swung with? What is that? It can't be a tail! It came from his hand! Do you think he's a spider?"

"Don't be ridiculous," replied Edward, sounding like a know-it-all. "He's obviously some sort of flying pig."

Dorabella was more concerned about how they kept referring to it as a boy.

"Hey! Why do you keep saying 'he'? It could be a girl you know . . ."

"Hah! A girl!" Sebastian gawked. "Don't make me laugh! Now, quiet! I'm trying to watch!"

The mysterious creature couldn't be caught no matter how many apes chased after it. Even when Old Black Beard sent his personal bodyguards, it always seemed to slip through their fingers.

"Ooh! Ahh! Ooh Ahh! More apes! More apes! Ooh Ahh! Ooh Ahh! What are you waiting for? Ooh Ahh! Ooh

Ahh! Ooh Ahh! Hey, you!" he yelled at one next to him. "What are you doing?" He grabbed him by the ear. "Don't just stand there! Get him! Get him!"

Soon there were apes everywhere. The mysterious creature was surrounded. Old Black Beard was sure that would be enough. But it wasn't! The creature was still too fast for them. Every time they'd try to grab or tackle it, it would duck, dodge, roll under or jump over them. One of the apes even swore he saw it jump on top of an ape's head while in midair, using it like a stepping stone!

"I can't catch it! It's too quick!" yelled one ape.

"Hurry! Someone grab its tail!" yelled another.

"It doesn't have one! It doesn't have one! That's what I keep trying to tell you! Try something else!"

And do you remember the rumor about how the creature could weave spider webs? Well, those turned out to be nets it threw at its enemies. Sometimes it would throw them at apes who were jumping towards it and catch them that way. Other times, it would throw them down at an open space and use them like a trampoline to jump higher. The only one who could keep up with him was Stomper. With his big legs, he could leap up to the same branch without the aid of any rope.

"One . . . two . . . three!" he counted. When he landed, the whole tree shook.

"Ho! Ho! Ho! . . . Hoo! Hoo! Hoo!" he grunted, walking slowly towards his victims. The branch was getting wet with his drool. The mysterious creature nearly slipped. It reached behind itself and pulled out a whip, lashing Stomper. But the giant just laughed. It reached again, this time pulling out a boomerang. But it just bounced off him.

"Ho! Ho! Ho! HO! HO! HO! Come on, Phantom Ape, and fight! Stomper not scared of you! HO! . . . HO! . . . HO! . . ."

He started walking closer, shaking the branch with

every step, making it difficult to balance. It was out of nets. Even worse, there was nowhere nearby to jump to.

“Blast!” said Sebastian getting worried. “Look at him, he’s trapped! We’ve got to do something! We’ve got to help! Or he’ll be stomped for sure!”

Sebastian didn’t care that he was little. While everyone else was busy just watching, he wanted to get involved and do something. So, he looked around and thought of an idea.

“I know!” he said. “I’ve got it! Watch!”

And he took off running down the branch his nest was on, fluttering and even flying a little here and there.

“Oh, Sebastian! Do be careful!” yelled his sister, who was ready to follow now if necessary.

“What’s gotten into that chick?” said one of the older birds in the tree. “I say! Has he gone mad?”

Sebastian found a large beehive nested right above where Stomper was standing.

“Hey!” he said to them. “Say, uh . . . Ahem . . . Do you guys mind if I—”

But the bees had already been thinking the same thing.

“Yezzz! DoOoOo it!” they all buzzed together. “We beezzz are ready to defend our tree!”

The queen stepped very carefully and daintily out of the hive and onto the branch where Sebastian was.

“Go on, soldiers! Do your duty! We all remember the war the apes waged on us last time! Now it’s time for—buzzzzz—our revenge!”

Then all of the bees yelled “For the queen!” and Sebastian pecked at the top, causing the hive to break off and fall down . . . down . . . right onto Stomper’s head! It broke open and they all started stinging him at once. “Hazza! Hazza! Buzz! Buzz! Buzz! Hazza! Take that!” It wasn’t long until the giant lost his balance and fell to the ground. He ran away crying after that, and was never seen again.

“Thanks!” said the mysterious creature, looking up at Sebastian and waving. Sebastian smiled, star-struck, and waved back.

That was the end of the Black Beard Gang. As soon as they saw their strongest ape run off, they fled or limped away along with him. Everyone cheered.

“NoOoOo!” sobbed Old Black Beard. “Come back, you fools! Don’t leave me!”

The mysterious creature picked up its whip and started swinging around the tree triumphantly—flipping through the air, waving, doing tricks and giving high fives. Never had the animals felt so excited.

Hoping no one would notice, Old Black Beard tried to slip away with the others. But the mysterious creature swung down just in time.

“Freeze!” it said, blocking his path. It drew its spear and thrust it to Old Black Beard’s neck, forcing him to back up to the trunk of the tree. “Don’t move! I’m warning you! Don’t try and run!”

Chapter 4

Old Black Beard Surrenders

The mysterious creature had the tip of its spear pressed against Old Black Beard's neck. Any further, and it would have pierced through the skin.

"Boo hoo!" the villain sobbed as he trembled in terror. "Boo hoo! Ooh ahh! Ooh ahh! P-p-p-please, sir! D-d-d-don't k-k-k-kill me! Ooh ahh!"

"Wow," marvelled Sebastian. "Look at him. He's like a big baby."

Many of the animals watching almost felt sorry for Old Black Beard. Some even took pity on him, whispering that he should be let go. The mysterious creature, however, felt very differently.

"Now, what do you have to say for yourself, thief? Kidnapper!"

It pressed its spear in a little more just to make sure Old Black Beard knew it was serious.

"Ah! Ouch! Ouch! Ouch! Oh, no! Please! I'm . . . ough . . . I'm sorry! Yes, I surrender! You win! Please! Let me go . . ."

"Hmm . . . just like you were going to let Lumpy and his friends go? And return the bananas you stole? Nope, you had your chance. Now you're under arrest!"

"Arrest? Oh, no! No! How terrible! How lamentable! Alas! Anything but that! Wait . . . what does 'arrest' mean?"

"It means I'm going to take you away! You took Lumpy and his friends as prisoners. So, now you're going to be their prisoner."

"Oh, no! Please don't! They hate me! Who knows what they'll do to me? I'm a goner if you take me back! Oh, boo hoo! Please don't, sir!"

"Well, you should have thought of that before you kidnapped their favorite prince."

"Prince?" Sebastian thought. "Lumpy was a prince? I didn't know that."

Lumpy jumped off the mysterious hero's back and onto its head. He posed nobly, like a handsome statue.

"You see?" said the mysterious creature.

"What? You've got to be kidding me! A little runt like him? A prince? No way! I'm the prince! Me! ME! I'm the king!"

"Not anymore you're not," replied the hero defiantly. "You're through. Your reign of terror is over."

"What! What did you say!" For a moment, he seemed to forget there was a spear to his throat. "Me? Through? How dare you speak to me like that! Guards! Seize him at once! You shall be whipped for your insolence! Guards! Gua- Ah! Ghup!" But when he remembered, he covered his mouth and returned to sobbing. "Ugh, I mean . . . I'm sorry for kidnapping your charming little friends. Please don't hurt me!"

"Sorry, but it's too late for that. You're coming with me. If you want to apologize to someone, you can apologize to the Brumbledumbs. Now, where are my handcuffs . . ."

The mysterious creature put away his staff, took out a small rope and began securing it to one of the ape's wrists. Old Black Beard knew this would be his only chance. A sinister smile spread across his face. Slowly and secretly, he raised his other wrist, getting ready to chop with it.

"Die, Phantom Ape! Die!" he screamed. "You'll never take me alive! Do you hear me? Now, witness my power! Hiii-yaaaa! Agh! Oof!"

But his plan was foiled again. In the blink of an eye, the mysterious creature caught the chop in midair and punched him square in the stomach, knocking the wind out of him. Unable to move, speak or even moan in pain, all Old Black Beard could do was collapse backwards and gaze up in fear.

“Wow! Look at that speed!” Sebastian cheered. “He’s so fast! I didn’t even see him move! Did you?”

“No, I didn’t . . .” marvelled Edward.

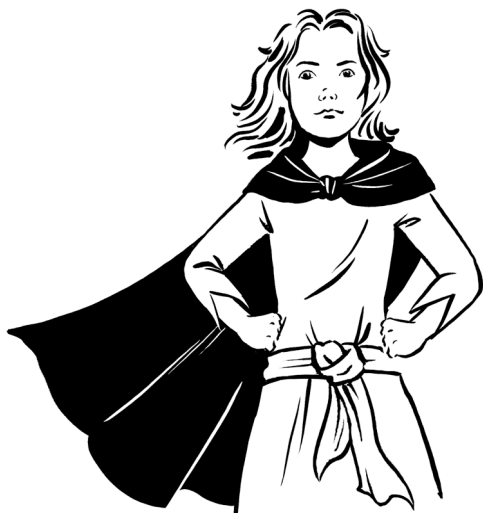
The mysterious creature crossed its arms and looked down at Old Black Beard.

“Nice try!” it said playfully. “But you’ll have to do better than that if you want to beat me!”

“What was this creature?” the animals all began to wonder. Even Old Black Beard seemed curious.

“W-w-who . . .” he stuttered, gasping for air and coughing. “Who . . . are . . . you? What are you? Before you take me, I have to know.”

Hearing all the whispers, the hero got the feeling like everyone else was curious too. So, he decided to remove his hood and mask. What the animals saw next shocked them. It wasn’t a bird. It wasn’t a bat. It wasn’t a spider. No, it wasn’t a flying pig either, like Edward had guessed. It was something else altogether that no animal in that wild forest had ever seen before.



It was a human—a human boy. He had long, shaggy brown hair, light skin and deep royal blue eyes. The animals gasped in astonishment. Especially the girls!

“Oh, goodness!” said Dorabella. “He’s so handsome!”

“Yes, I wonder if he has a girlfriend!” said another.

“I saw him first!” said yet another.

The boy animals all thought he looked tough and brave, like they wanted to be. The whole tree erupted with applause and cheers.

“Well, time to go,” said the boy, securing the rope to Old Black Beard’s other hand. As he dragged him along, the tree’s thorns would poke his bottom.

“Ouch! Ouch! Ouch!”

Then the boy whistled and a wolf pulling a sled appeared at the bottom. He picked up the whip he’d lost earlier and slashed open the big leafy sack that held the stolen bananas. It burst like a piñata and they all fell. Lumpy reached out and grabbed three or four, stuffing them in his mouth. He stuffed a few into Old Black Beard’s mouth too, so he couldn’t talk.

“You’re all ruffians! All of you! When I get out of here, I’m going to—Oof! MmMm! MmMm! MmMmMm!”

The boy dropped into the sled with them, giving high fives all the way down. Then, he hopped up to the front to help pull.

“Bye, everyone!” he called. “See you next time!”

“Bye!” the crowd roared back. “THANK YOU!”

Sebastian watched him disappear over the horizon.

“Now do you believe, Edward?” he teased, crossing his wings triumphantly. His poor brother felt very silly now, reader. “Well?”

Dorabella was afraid they’d start fighting again.

But instead, the two birds just laughed. Dorabella laughed too. The three of them held wings and jumped up and down together, finally feeling like a happy family again.

Chapter 5

The Journey Home

That's what happened at the Life Tree that day, reader! Old Black Beard was arrested. His gang was no more. News continued to spread about the mysterious warrior who protected and rescued the weak. Finally, the forest in the great valley was at peace.

But little did everyone know, this was only just the beginning. There was another villain, even more powerful than Old Black Beard, who lived far over the mountains. He planned on invading and destroying the forest—and eventually taking over the whole world: a villain known as the Dragon King.

This story is about that Dragon King, reader, and the adventure that two young heroes—a boy and a girl—went on to stop him.

It would be the first of many adventures they would go on to save the world. Each more exciting and magical than the last! The book you are now holding is but one of many in a vast library that chronicles them.

But of all the adventures in the collection, reader, this first one about the Dragon King is by far the most important—because this is the one that shows how it all got started. Who were our hero and heroine? Where did they come from? How did they meet and become friends? As you'll soon see, the adventures came very close to never happening at all.

In fact, if even one little thing you are about to read hadn't occurred, not only would our two heroes never have met, but the young forest boy here wouldn't even have left the great valley! In the beginning of our story, he was perfectly happy in the wild. He didn't even know there was an "outside the valley."

But something happened that day after the battle at the Life Tree, reader. Something that changed our hero

forever and set him upon a new path of exploration over the horizon.

I will begin, first, by telling you this story. Then, in the next volume, I will tell you the tale of our heroine and how she got involved in all these adventures too.

It all started at precisely the moment our hero was coming around a bend after the battle. As you remember, he had just finished saving Lumpy and his friends, seizing back the stolen fruit and capturing grumpy Old Black Beard, former boss of the Black Beard Gang. He was pulling them all through the grass on a sled, accompanied by a great grey wolf. Lumpy was fast asleep with his belly full. Old Black Beard still had a banana tied into his mouth.

They came to a meadow with a stream of crystal-clear water running through it. Suddenly, the glimmer of the sun's reflection off it caught the boy's eye, and he couldn't help but decide it was a good place to rest. They pulled in and let go of the reins, exhausted. Then they ran over to have a drink.

It was very funny to see. He dropped down on all fours and started licking it up, in exactly the same manner the wolf did. He even dunked his head in and started shaking himself dry like a wolf. If he'd been covered in fur, you might not even think he was a boy at all.

The reason for all of this very odd behavior was, of course, because our hero was raised by a wolf—the same one he was with now. She found him as an abandoned baby nine years ago and brought him up just like a cub. They were very different, but had been best friends ever since.

After they drank their fill and cooled off, they fell backward onto the grass to relax in the light. It was our hero's favorite thing to do. He cupped his hand over his eyes and looked up at the sun, thinking all sorts of funny thoughts about it.

*I wonder what it's made of? How did it get there?
Where does it go?*

Our hero loved wondering. If he had the time, he might have done so all day. His wolf friend, however, felt very differently.

"Hey!" she said to him, whacking him over the head with her paw. "Stop it!"

It was what she always did when she saw the boy thinking, and this might have been the biggest difference between them.

"Ouch! Hey! What was that for? Stop what?"

"That! Thinking! You know I don't like it when you do that."

The wolf's name was Ava. And ever since he was a toddler, she discouraged thinking as much as she could.

"Always remember, if you think, you hesitate. And if you hesitate, you're dead. It's why that one big ape almost beat you. You hesitated. You should have charged in. That's the last thing he'd expect."

"Oh . . . sorry," replied the boy.

Ava had taught him everything she knew about fighting. It was all she seemed to care about. "Thinking," she would always say, "is for fools—for if you have to think, it means you don't know." She felt the same way about any kind of fun or playing. All a big waste of time. She wasn't a very nice wolf at all.

"And all that showboating! You know I don't like that either. You lost focus! There could have still been someone around to attack you. Get in and get out. No funny business. Hey! Are you listening to me?"

The sun had caught the boy's attention again. He was very forgetful of her rules.

"Hmm . . ." he sighed as he started wondering again. "Hmm . . ."

"Oh, great. Here we go again . . ."

"I wonder where it goes . . . What do you think, Ava?"

He looked over at her, but she wasn't interested. The only thing she ever liked to talk about was war.

"Where does the sun go? What a silly question!"

"Aw, come on. I don't think it is. I'm curious!"

"Curiosity killed the cat. I know—because I'm the one who eats cats! Or at least I used to, back in the old days when you were more fun."

"I bet it's somewhere warm," the boy continued, growing even more curious. "Being warm itself, that's probably where it would want to be. Maybe there is a place where it's always warm, somewhere where food and flowers grow all year long, where there's no snow—except maybe on mountains—and no winter. Ah," he sighed. "No winter. Wouldn't that be nice?"

The boy rolled over and looked at his friend, hoping to get her opinion. But instead, she just rolled her eyes.

"Hmph. Whatever. Fool . . ." She then sat up and headed back to the sled. "No, it's silly—the whole thing! Now, come on. Let's get going."

"Wait, do we have to? Just a little longer . . ."

He was so comfortable lying there under the sun. But he knew Ava didn't care. He could almost feel her eyes on him, glaring.

"Alright," he said. "I'm coming . . . I'm coming . . ."

Our two heroes hopped back up to the front of the sled and pulled it the rest of the way to Lumpy's ape village. They crossed over great and vast fields of flowers, around long winding cliffs on the sides of mountains, and took secret passages and short cuts that led through underground ice caves or behind waterfalls—the same waterfalls with rainbows over them that young Sebastian would see in the distance and dream about. Before long, they found themselves in a lush wood with soft grass and black soil. It was no wonder the Brumbedumbs chose to build their home here. There were many berries and fruit you could pick right off the ground all summer long. As they ap-

proached, they were greeted with even more cheering than when they had left the Life Tree that morning.

“Look, he’s back!”

“There’s Lumpy! He saved them!”

“I knew he would!”

“And there’s Old Black Beard, all tied up! He got him!”

“And our bananas! Hurray!”

All of the little girl apes then rushed up into the trees to shower them with white flower petals, making it look like it was snowing. The young males all ran to try and get a glimpse of the hero up-close.

“Get out of my way!”

“Ouch! Quit pushing me! I was here first!”

When the sled finally stopped, it was immediately surrounded by a crowd full of curiosity, questions and excitement.

“Oh, hey everyone!” said the boy pulling up. He was so used to this sort of welcome by now that he hardly noticed anymore. “Umm, how are you all doing?”

“Hey! Is that your stinger?” asked one of the little apes.

“No, it’s just a stick, see? I call it a spear.”

“Can I see it?”

“Sure, but you have to be careful. It’s sharp.”

“Can you really fly?”

“Nope. It just looks like it sometimes. I’ve got this whip, you see? I can swing with it. And I can make trampolines. Sometimes I can glide too. But my last glider broke. I’ve got to make a new one.”

“Ooh!” they all sighed delightedly.

“Hey! Where’s your tail?”

“Don’t have one.”

“Where did it go?”

“I don’t know—must have fallen off or something.”

“Can you really go invisible?”

"Nope—just good at hiding."

The boy enjoyed talking to other animals and answering questions, even if he didn't always have the answer. But Ava hated it.

"Hey everyone! Look! It's Ava! She's a hero too!"

"What? No, I'm not. Leave me alone. Hey, get off me!"

Many of the apes surrounded her and started trying to put flowers into her fur, or kissing her on her cheek. She hated every minute of it.

"Ugh—yuck! Gross!"

But it was a part of the job, and she knew it.

"Pugh! Apes . . ." she muttered.

The crowd's attention was then drawn to a deep and somewhat funny voice coming from behind it.

"Out'f my way! Out'f my way! Ooh ooh!"

The boy recognized it—Lumpy's father!

"Ooh ooh! Grr! Where is he!? Where is he!?" he growled. "Where is Lumpy!?"

He pushed and shoved his way through the crowd, often picking apeling up and tossing them over his shoulder—though, that was quite a normal thing for apes to do, even when they weren't upset. Any apeling he tossed would end up landing safely on a branch above.

"Where is he!? Where is he!? Do you know where he is? No? Hi-ya! What about you? Or you! Hiya! Hiya! Where is that little fur ball!" He pushed through, all the way to where Lumpy was sleeping. "Ooh! Ooh! Ooh! When I find him, I'm going to wring his little . . ."

But when his father saw him wake up, yawn and stretch his tiny little arms, he remembered how much he loved him and began to shed tears of joy instead.

"Aww, come'ere son," he sighed. "Come'ere! Give your father a hug! Oh! Boo hoo! We missed you! I'm sorry for yellin'."

And Lumpy jumped into his arms. The other two little apes found their families as well.

"You're safe! Look at you!" said all the mothers and fathers. "You're alright! Thank you!" they cried turning to our hero. "Thank you so much!"

It put the biggest smile on our hero's face and the deepest joy in his heart to see them all together where they belonged.

"You're welcome! Anytime!"

But soon the crowd started to grow so big that the boy, Ava and the sled looked like they were getting swallowed up by them. It was getting out of control. So, Lumpy's father had to break it up.

"Alright, that's enough! The show's over! Break it up! Leave'm alone! He needs to relax! Go on! Scram!"

The apeling listened and started running off together to play. Ava shook out all the flowers they put in her hair and stuck around the sled to keep an eye on Old Black Beard, who was still tied up.

"What are you going to do with him?" she asked.

"Who? Him? Oh, most severe punishment indeed! Seven days of corporal cuddlin'!"

"MmMmMm!" Old Black Beard shrieked.

"Take him away, fellas!"

"MmMmMmMm!"

"Now," he continued, putting his arm around the boy. "We'd better get you indoors before anyone else sees ya'. Especially the young ladies round 'ere. You remember last time! Hmm, I know—you can come to my house! Yes! Come this way! There is something I want to show you!"

Chapter 6

Lumpy's Family

Lumpy's father led the boy to their little home under a tree. It was very warm and cozy. There were soft places to sit and beds anyone could hop up and nap in. Roots from the tree came down through the roof for the little children apes to play or hang on.

Lumpy had many brothers and sisters who ran up to the boy and greeted him with hugs and big monkey kisses on his cheek. They took him by the hand and led him over to their mother, who was resting on a little bed. She was cradling something that everyone seemed excited about. Our hero wondered what it was.

Lumpy's father then went over and scooped it up, letting out a great sigh of joy, and brought it over.

"Ah, look! Look! Here he is! My new son! Here! Hold'm! Take a look for yourself!"

The boy very reluctantly put his arms out. He had never actually held an ape baby before. He would have asked about the right way of doing it, but it was already too late. The father extended his arms and dropped the child. The boy caught him just in time. The baby had big round brown eyes and short fuzzy hair. He had the cutest, tiniest little ears, a little nose and an adorable expression of curiosity as he tried to work out why his mother's face had suddenly changed.

"Goo gah! Goo gah!" He babbled.

"Ah, you hear that!" said the father. "He almost has his 'ooh ahh' down. Must o' been practice'n! Good job, kiddo!"

Our hero's eyes lit up and he smiled delightedly. What a charming little creature! He had always loved looking at babies, but rarely ever got the opportunity. Animals in the wild tended to be very careful about that.

They wouldn't let you anywhere near them unless they trusted you.

"Oh, wow!" said our hero. "Look! He's so small . . ."

"Hmm? Small? Oh, yes! Very small. But quick and sneaky! Even at that age, if you don't keep an eye on 'em!" answered the father. "Especially Lumpy! He was always run'n and leap'n and crawl'n off! He ran out of our whole village once! Had to wrestle a great snake to save him."

"Really?" asked the boy. "You fought a snake?"

"Oh, yes! I had to. And gave him a good walloping, too! He never knew what hit him!"

"Oh, please," interrupted Lumpy's mother then, with a sigh. "That snake had you so tied up, you couldn't move. It was me who pulled you out, remember?"

"Alright!" muttered the father. "Anyway, it's not important how I did it—ahem, I mean how *we* did it. The point is that *he* got away and *we* got him home safe again!"

"But you could have died," said the boy concerned. "Snakes that size eat apes."

It was one thing for our hero to fight a beast like that. He had weapons and training—not to mention, a fully grown wolf at his side. But one of the Brumbledumb apes? It was true that they were strong, but they weren't warriors.

"Yes, yes! I suppose I could have," answered the father. "But there are more important things than not dying."

Lumpy's mother nodded in agreement.

"Yeah, I guess so," said our hero.

"Oh, that reminds me! It's why I brought you here. You know how you're always helping us? Well, I've decided to name this one after you, in your honor! Er, the two of us, I mean." He glanced at his wife. "The one you're hold'n! What do ya' say?"

The boy stood frozen and surprised. No one had ever asked him such a question before. He thought about it and

then looked down to see if maybe the little one had an opinion.

“What do you think, baby?”

The apeling didn’t seem very enthusiastic. Neither did he seem very happy being held by him. What had happened to his mother? Who was this imposter? The baby started to squirm and tear up. Our hero saw this and quickly returned him.

“Oh! Sorry! Here you go . . .”

“The Invisible Hand!” yelled out the father. “That will be his name! Handy, for short!”

“Andy,” said the mother correcting him.

“Ugh . . . ahem . . . alright . . . Andy then!”

No one actually knew what our hero’s real name was yet, reader. Like the “Phantom Ape,” the “Invisible Hand” was merely a nickname. Not even our hero knew his real name. He hadn’t come with one when Ava had found him as a baby. Nor had he answered to any name, except with crying. So, for a long time Ava just called him “cry baby” and other things she’d make up as she raised him. Then, as he grew and finally emerged, crawling from their cave, other animals saw and joined in. He didn’t always like or understand the names he was called. The “Invisible Hand” was particularly peculiar. But he did always find them interesting.

“Yes, yes! Andy!” the father continued, feeling very proud of his decision.

“Sure!” said the boy.

“Who knows, maybe when he grows up, he will have your strength!”

“Yeah, maybe!”

“Which reminds me . . .” The father seemed to need a lot of reminding. “Why don’t you have any little ones yet?”

“Hmm? What do you mean?” the boy answered.

"You know—babies! Kids! Why, when I was your age, I already had three!"

"Oh . . . I don't know . . ."

The father then shuffled over and began whispering to him up close. Maybe even a little too close.

"Um . . . It's not because of your, uh . . . little *problem*, is it?"

He glanced down at the boy's body and looked concerned. The boy looked too. But he didn't see anything.

"What problem?" he asked curiously.

"Well . . . you know . . ." said the father, trying to be as polite as possible—and not at all awkward. "Well . . . I mean . . . well, look at you! Look! Your body! You're all skin! No hair anywhere! Except on your head!" As the father spoke, he pinched the boy on his arm, which made him jump a bit. "It gets so cold at night. I don't know how you sleep, being like that!"

"Oh, I see . . ."

It was something the boy sometimes wondered about as well.

"Anyway," the father continued, clearing his throat. "Ahem . . . I want you to know that it's *not* a problem anymore. My sister has had'r eye on you for quite some time! And I've spoken to'r! And she's said she'd be will'n to be patient of it! Come!" said the father, taking the boy by the arm. "Come! Come and see for yourself . . ."

He led him to a window. Our hero was feeling even more confused.

"Huh? What? Who? Where?"

"Shh! Look! Over there!"

He pointed outside. The boy squinted and cupped his hand over his eyes to see better.

"Look! He! He! Do you see now?"

There was a girl ape out there. An enormous one! Tall and round! And she was looking right back at him!

"He! He! Well, what do you think?"

Our hero didn't understand what he was asking until

he saw the ape girl start batting her eyelashes, giggling and waving at him—making kissy faces!

“Agh!” the boy yelled, horrified.

“Well?” said the father, rubbing his hands together, getting very excited. “Well, come on! Tell me! What do you think? Pretty, ain’t she? Just look at that beard! And those whiskers! And that hairy chest! Enough to keep you both warm, if you follow my mean’n . . . He! He! He!”

“Agh!” shrieked the boy again. He tumbled back this time and tripped over a root. He fell all the way back onto his head.

“Uhhh . . . uhhh . . . ummm . . .” he squeaked as he tried to scramble back to his feet. “Uhhh . . . ummm . . . no . . . no . . . no, thank you . . .”

Lumpy’s father felt very puzzled and surprised.

“What! Really? Are you sure?”

“Yes! Yes!”

“She’ll be disappointed, you know . . .”

The boy had to catch his breath.

“That’s . . . that’s okay . . .”

“Well, alright then—if you say so.”

The father went back to the window and gave the girl ape a thumbs down. She was very disappointed indeed and ran off somewhere to cry.

“You will at least stay for dinner, though, won’t you?”

Now that was something the boy *was* interested in. He clamped his palms together and licked his lips. He was just about to say “yes” when suddenly an ominous voice from behind them spoke:

“Not tonight.”

The boy, the father and the whole ape family spun around, where in the corner they saw Ava. None of them knew how long she’d been sitting there listening.

“Woah!” said the ape father. “Ava, what are you trying to do? Give me a heart attack? Sneaky monkey! Well, you’re welcome to stay too, of course!”

“No, thanks,” she replied coldly. “Come on, kid. We’re leaving. Now.”

She looked up and directed everyone’s attention to a window in the ceiling where dark clouds could be seen forming. It was the last day of fall and she didn’t like getting back to the cave before it was too late.

“Ho! Ho! Wow! Would you look at that! Ava is right! Yes, it looks like a winter storm will be roll’n in soon. You two best be getting home quick! Unless you want to move in with us for the winter. We got room!”

Ava turned around without even caring to answer and started walking out. But the boy didn’t want to go yet. He had worked so hard that day and wanted to rest and be with his friends, not go back to the cave. He hated winter—more than anything. The winters were particularly harsh in this forest, reader. Everything would freeze. It was almost impossible to find any food. All he could do was gather as much of it as possible and do his best to keep it fresh before it spoiled—or try to eat as much as he could beforehand. That’s why he had a much bigger belly right now than usual. A cold shiver went down his spine as he thought about going back.

“We can stay just a little longer, can’t we?” he asked quietly with his stomach rumbling.

Ava stalled in the doorway. “No,” she answered. Then she was gone.

Chapter 7

Henry the Bear



All of the Brumbledumbs gathered at the border to say goodbye. They offered our hero some of their bananas as a gift, but he didn't take any. Winter had nearly arrived and the boy knew the large family would need every one of them to survive. Especially the little ones.

"Thank you, everyone!" he shouted. "See you in spring! Goodbye! I'll miss you!"

"Thank you!" the apes all shouted back. "You're welcome any time! Goodbye! Stay warm!"

It was a lovely end to another lovely visit. And when our heroes left, there were many more animals who came to say goodbye, for now that the Black Beard Gang had been defeated—as well as almost all of the other bullies—the forest finally felt safe again. The friendly animals could come out and play one last time before the seasons changed.

"Hello!" they would squeak as the boy passed by. "Thank you for saving us!"

"You're welcome!" he would reply.

Some animals would even come right up and let the boy pet them. Or, if they were small enough, they would

sit on his shoulder as he walked, regaling him with news and gossip about the forest. Who was being naughty? Who was being nice? What kinds of new villains might be emerging? Which way home should our hero go? And so on.

“Hey! Psst! Listen! There are some apples over there! No one’s seen them yet!” a little bird whispered in his ear.

“Thanks!”

Or . . .

“Be careful, sonny, there is quicksand ahead . . .”

It was the old turtles who gave him that advice.

“Sure,” he replied. “Thank you for telling—”

“Young whipper snappers! Run’n round without any patience! Darn kids ain’t got no virtue, I tells ye! No virtue! What’s wrong with parents these days?”

“Oh, umm . . . that’s too bad. I’m sorry to hear that.”

“Never mind that, sonny. You best be heading home.”

“Right!”

“Wisely and slow, now. They stumble who run.”

“I will. Bye, Mr. Turtle!”

But along the way there was one animal who caught the boy’s attention more than any other: his old friend, Henry the Bear. He was large, had thick bushy brown fur and was always smiling and singing merrily wherever he went. Our hero heard him and rushed over to say hello.

La! La! La! Berries! Berries!

Squash ‘em in my mouth!

Row after row!

On our way down south!

Yummy, yummy berries!

Apples, bananas, peas and cherries!

What better place than in . . .

Bears’ bellies!

La! La! La!

Ava wanted to ignore it and just keep going. But it was too late.

"Henry! Hey, over here!" the boy called out.

"Oh! Hello, there!" Henry answered. "Why, what a wonderful surprise! Ho! Ho! Ho!"

Henry the Bear was one of our hero's favorite animals in the whole forest. He'd met him when he was very young. Henry taught him how to fish and do many other tricks. "If you let the little fishies go, they'll grow into bigger fishies later for you to eat," the boy remembered him saying. Henry had kept the boy close ever since.

Ava, on the other hand, didn't like Henry at all. She thought his singing was annoying and that his laugh was stupid. And he laughed a lot because he was always tickling himself.

"Ah, hah! Ah, hah, hah, hah, hah! Muah! Hah! Hah! Hah!"

Just like that.

Ava put up with him when he was around but was always eager to get away as soon as possible.

"Yeah! It's a nice surprise to see you too!" answered the boy. "How's your summer been?"

"Oh, simply un-bear-able!" answered Henry with a chuckle. "The ground is dry. There isn't a single blueberry anywhere! Not even in the meadows. I haven't eaten a thing in three days."

"Oh, I see," said the boy, feeling concerned.

"But you seem to be doing quite well for yourself. Yes! You are much taller than I saw you last! A plump belly! And—such nice round thighs . . . He! He!"

The boy glanced down at himself.

"Thanks . . . I guess . . ." he answered, shrugging.

"You are very welcome! So polite, too."

Henry patted the boy on his head with his great big bear paw.

"Maybe I can help you?" our hero asked.

He went into one of his pockets and pulled out a little pouch.

"I've been collecting acorns. See?"

Henry's eyes lit up.

"Oh! Acorns! Wow! I can see that you have! Very clever! Yes! Look at that, Ava! Now, that is SMART isn't it?"

Ava rolled her eyes.

"Here," said the boy, putting his hand out. "Have some."

"No! Oh, no! I couldn't! You've earned those fair and square. You keep them. Besides—Heh! Heh! We bears prefer softer . . . juicier things . . . like fish or honey. Acorns would only give me a belly ache. And you wouldn't want that, now, would you?"

"No . . ." said the boy sadly. He slouched and looked ashamed that he didn't have anything else to give.

"Aw! Don't worry about me, bucko. Your old Uncle Henry will be alright. I always am! Muah! Hah! Hah!"

Henry patted him on the head again and playfully messed up his hair. He burst out laughing and started tickling himself. Then he started tickling the boy and made him laugh too, to cheer him up.

"Ho! Ho! Ho! Ho! Tickle! Tickle! He! He! I wouldn't mind your company, though! Which way are you headed, my boy? Maybe your old Uncle Henry could come too! He! He!"

"Which way do you think we're headed?" asked Ava grouchily. She couldn't take the laughing and playing anymore. "Overgrown weasel! It's nearly winter. We're going home! Where else!?"

"Oh, really? What a coincidence! I'm going that way too! And, yes, it is almost winter, isn't it? Silly me! Look at the time! I must have forgotten!" Henry was still having fun tickling the boy, who was rolling in laughter from it. Our hero liked that game. "Look! Everyone is out looking

for food to survive, but me! What a fool I am! He! He! He!"

"No. You can't come with us. Buzz off! Go and annoy someone else."

"Aw, come on, Ava," said the boy, getting back up. "It'll be fun. I want him to come. I haven't seen Henry in a long time. Besides, he's my friend."

Henry smiled a great big bear smile at Ava, showing all of his teeth. There was something strange about this bear. She didn't trust him.

"Yes, come on, Ava! Don't be such a spoilsport. We'll get the boy home safe. We just want to have a little fun on the way, that's all. Sing a little! Talk! I've got some new jokes I could tell you guys! Ho! Ho! Ho!"

Ava looked at the boy, who seemed very eager for Henry to come. She didn't like the idea one bit. That's when Henry whispered something to her.

"Psst . . . Hey, come on. Give the kid a break. You know he has a hard winter ahead of him this year. We both know it could be his last. Don't spoil this for him. He's a good boy and deserves a laugh or two. You've trained him well. Give him a break just this once. Whaddya say, old pal?"

He reached out to pat Ava on her head too, but stopped when he saw the look in her eye, as if she'd bite him. No one pet Ava—ever.

Nevertheless, Henry did have a point. He got her thinking. Maybe it wasn't such a bad idea after all. The boy had worked hard and done well. Besides, with Henry around, they might even be able to get there faster and safer. It was the only redeeming thing about him, in her opinion. No one ever tried to ambush them when Henry was nearby.

"Alright, fine," she finally relented.

"Really? Oh, yeah! Great!" the boy exclaimed. "Did you hear that, Henry? You can come!"

He hugged his bear friend tightly.

"Hurray!" Henry cheered with a chuckle. "Ho! Ho! Ho! You're right, my boy! She said so, indeed! Ho! Ho! Ho! What a great friend! Come on! Let's go!"

"Yeah!"

They turned around and started walking together. Finally, they could get moving. That's all Ava really wanted at that point. But no sooner had they taken their first steps, then Henry suddenly stopped again.

"Oh! Wait!"

Our two heroes halted with him.

"What is it, Henry?" the boy asked.

"Make it quick," said Ava.

Henry cleared his throat. He seemed a little different than usual. But Ava couldn't figure out what it was.

"Ahem! Well, nothing really. I just thought of an idea. That's all."

"What?" asked the boy.

"Err—well, what about if we go . . . this way . . . instead . . . over here. Heh! Heh!"

"That way? Hmm . . ." It was something of an odd request. Even the boy thought so. "Why?" he asked.

"Yeah, why?" Ava asked too, but with more suspicion.

"Oh, you know . . . it's just a little easier . . . for these old legs o' mine. Not quite as rocky. It's shorter too."

"And more dangerous," added Ava.

"Not with me around it ain't. Heh! Heh! I don't mean to intrude, of course. It's up to you. We can go any way you please. I just thought you wanted to get home sooner than later. Perhaps I was wrong."

"Sure, we can go that way, Henry," answered the boy. He felt bad that he couldn't give Henry any food earlier. But at least he could help make the trip easier for him. "Especially if you're around. What could go wrong?"

Henry felt very touched and giggled.

“Aw, you are very kind.” Then he hugged the boy again. “What a good, good boy you are!”

Ava didn’t like the idea. But the storm was blowing in fast. She didn’t want to waste any more time. The sooner they got home, the better.

“Alright then! It’s settled!” Henry shouted out excitedly before she could answer. He wagged his stubby little tale. “Hah! Follow me! Your Uncle Henry will lead the way. Mauh, hah, hah! Come on, Ava! Pick up your feet! Quit doddling back there! Muah! Hah! Hah! Muah hah, hah, hah, hah!”

Chapter 8

The Tunnel to Snake Valley

The only thing the boy ever found odd about Henry the Bear was how he very often broke into fits of uncontrollable laughter—even when nothing funny had happened.

“Brah! Hah! Hah! Hah! . . . Brah! Hah! Hah! Hah! Hah! Hah! . . . Ooh! Hoo! Hoo! Hah! Hah! . . . Hah! Hah! Hah! . . .”

Though usually, it was because of the stories or jokes he’d tell.

“And then!” he would say as they walked. “I fell so in love with her . . . Brah! Hah! Hah! Hah! . . . that I began chasing her around . . . Brah! Hah! Hah! Poor thing! I think she thought I was trying to eat her! Brah! Hah! Hah! Brah! Hah! Hah! . . .”

The boy didn’t understand most of Henry’s jokes. They were too strange. But when he saw Henry laugh at them, he laughed too, for of all his favorite things, there was nothing that pleased him more than seeing his friends happy.

Ava, on the other hand, didn’t care for his songs or jokes at all. She thought they were silly. So, as they walked, she would trail silently behind as the lookout.

“Could you two buffoons please keep your cackling to a minimum? You’re going to wake up the tigers!”

“Ah, relax Ava,” said Henry as though she were spoiling all the fun. “You’re almost home. We just need to pass through this little tunnel here first. But beware! He! He! The way is treacherous. Many pits! The slightest misstep may lead you hurtling to your doom. Brah! Hah! Hah! Hah!”

The boy didn’t see what was so funny about that, but he did as he was told. They went into the tunnel and stepped very carefully. It was dark and full of large cracks

you could fall through. Sometimes thunder from the approaching storm would make everything shake. It made a deep rumble and echo that Henry said sounded like his hungry belly. He tickled himself all the way down and hummed. Many times, Ava thought about throwing him down one of the pits. Our hero just focused on not slipping.

At one point, he did almost slip and fall. They turned a corner to where some bats were hanging. They awoke and started flying all around him. Shooing them away made him stumble over a rock. He nearly went down a pit, but was caught by Henry just in time.

"Careful, laddy!" he said. His voice echoed loudly "Brah! Hah! Hah! Oh my! That was a close one. Brah! Hah! Hah!"

The boy gulped.

"Thanks!"

Henry lifted and dropped him safely back on the path.

"Fool!" chided Ava. "Watch your step!"

"Sorry."

"Whose idea was it to come in here anyway?" she asked. "I don't remember this tunnel."

"Oh, 'tis a secret tunnel. Tee! He! He! Only us bears know about."

"Well, I don't like it one bit," Ava answered.

"Hah! Where's your sense of adventure? We're having fun! Aren't we, my boy?"

Henry smiled with all of his teeth again.

"Yeah, I guess . . ." our hero answered, brushing himself off.

"Come on," said Ava. "How much longer to Snake Valley? Our cave isn't far from there. You said this way would be faster."

"Oh, yes. Anytime now. The tunnel leads right to it. There is even a song about it. Shall I sing it for you?"

"No!" she snapped at him.

The boy wasn't sure he wanted Henry to sing either. There wasn't much light. He couldn't see well. He had to focus on the ground or he would slip again for sure.

"Suit yourselves!" laughed Henry. "It matters not. Besides, we're already here! And, by golly, right in time for the sunset!" Henry darted out excitedly. "Come on. I'll race you!" They both ran now that they could see. The tunnel led out to a cliff that overlooked the whole rocky valley. "Oh, wow! Oh, my! Beautiful! Beautiful! Isn't it?"

The boy liked sunsets too. Both of them stood astonished.

"Well? What do you think?" asked Henry.

"It's a great spot! And thanks for the shortcut," our hero answered.

"It's my pleasure," Henry said tenderly. He saw that Ava wasn't out of the tunnel yet. He took the opportunity to speak alone with the boy.

"You know . . ." he said, suddenly becoming serious. The boy looked up at him and listened closely. "I . . . I don't have many friends . . ."

"Hmm? What do you mean, Henry?" he asked. He was a little surprised. Usually, Henry didn't talk seriously. But something seemed to be troubling him.

"Oh, nothing . . ." he sighed. "I just get lonely sometimes, I suppose." He kept checking over his shoulder for Ava to come out. It was very odd behavior, indeed. "I spend all the winter alone . . . without anyone to watch sunsets with or share a meal with. And . . . well . . . I wanted to tell you . . . before you two go to your home . . . that . . . I really like you a lot . . . and am so grateful to have you as a friend . . . and for all the fun you've given me over the years."

He looked so sad as he spoke. It sounded like it might be the last time they'd see each other.

All kinds of terrible thoughts went through our hero's

mind—images of Henry feeling sad and suffering alone in his bear cave. Maybe Henry didn't have enough food to survive in winter this year. Maybe he was sick—or sick with loneliness. He kept listening.

"Anyway . . ." Henry sighed, drying his tears. "What I am trying to say is . . . I'll miss you." He patted the boy on the head. "You have been like a cub to me."

"You've been a good friend too, Henry," the boy answered. "But we'll see each other again."

"I hope so."

Henry checked over his shoulder again. He saw Ava's shadow in the cave. Soon, she'd be out.

"And what about your dear wolf friend?" Henry asked next. "She is wonderful, isn't she?"

"Yeah, she's great."

"She loves you so much. So much, in fact, I think she would even die for you. Wouldn't you agree?"

"Yeah," answered the boy sadly. "She would. She's the best. Actually she . . ."

The boy paused. Something seemed to be saddening him.

"Yes? What is it, my boy? What's troubling you? Tell me. You can tell your old Uncle Henry."

"Well, it's just . . . she did almost die last winter . . . just like you said."

"Really? Oh, how terrible! I had no idea. What happened?"

"Well," he said gulping, holding back his tears. "I keep getting bigger, you see."

"Yes, I see that. Heh . . . Heh . . ."

"And so, I keep needing more food. I wish I didn't but—well, last year we didn't have enough. We both got sick. But she got real sick—and almost died."

"Oh!" sighed Henry sensitively. "How awful! She gave you her portions so you wouldn't starve. How much she must love you."

"Yeah . . . and I'm not sure we'll have enough this year either. Though, I've done my best. I really have."

Ava emerged from the cave and saw them talking.

"Yes, that you have, laddy! You're a good boy." He patted our hero on the head again and wiped his tears for him. "But here she comes. Shh!" he whispered. "Don't worry! Your Uncle Henry will help you out. I've got a little surprise for you. It's just down the hill here. You'll see! But here she comes! Let's just keep this little chat between you and me, shall we?"

The boy nodded.

Henry smiled and turned around.

"Ho there! Ava! Over here! Glad you made it out, old friend! So wonderful to see you!"

Ava looked at them suspiciously, wondering why they were looking at her so fondly all of the sudden.

"What?" she asked, disgusted.

"Yes, me too!" said the boy running up to her. "I'm glad you're here!"

He gave Ava a big hug.

"Ugh—yuck! Get off me!" She pushed him off. "What's gotten into you?"

"Sorry!"

"What were you two talking about?"

"Oh, nothing," answered Henry. "Only that we should get you and our handsome young man here back home as soon as possible."

"Hmph," Ava scoffed. "Well . . . good. Let's go then."

"Yes! Yes! How stupid of me for stalling! Thank you for being so patient with a forgetful old bear like me. Tee! He! He!"

He then whispered to the boy before running on ahead.

"Psst! Follow me! This way! I have a surprise. You have nothing to worry about. Come! Come down here and see for yourself!"

He tickled and pinched himself as he ran and began another song:

*Friends! Friends!
Helping each other!
Friends! Friends!
I've got one like no other!
I'm gonna surprise my friend!
It's just around the bend!
We just need to descend . . .
A little farther!*

Chapter 9

Henry's Surprise

As I am sure you can tell by now, dear reader, our hero wasn't very bright. It was his one big weakness. Henry the Bear knew this and used it to set a most ingenious trap for him. A trap that would have very painful consequences, but also lead to the beginning of one of the greatest adventures ever told.

It's a very sad part of our story, I'm sorry to have to tell you. It's also, I'm afraid, quite scary. If there was ever a time to skip ahead or hide under the covers, that time would certainly be now. But if you're feeling brave, I would encourage you to read on. Here is what happened to him that day.

After guiding our hero and Ava through the tunnel, Henry led them down into Snake Valley—a dark, barren and dusty wasteland that was famous for its tall, thin mountain in the middle, called Snake Mountain. It was black and jagged looking—like out of a nightmare—and full of little holes where the deadliest snakes lived. At night, you could see their eyes glowing out of the shadows. If it was quiet enough, you could even hear their hisses and whispers.

The snakes guarded a tree at the top that was full of plump, juicy fruit. Many animals in the forest had ventured there and tried to climb for it, but all had failed. Skeletons lay at the bottom and the whole valley was teeming with vultures. They sat in their nests, patiently waiting for whoever would be next. When they saw Henry guiding our hero there, they licked their lips and cackled.

Ava didn't want to be down there at all. She didn't like Snake Valley. Least of all, she cared for surprises. Besides, the first storm of winter was approaching. It was closing in fast. That meant it wasn't long before the winter predators

would arrive. The winter predators were stronger than she was and she was afraid that they might even be stronger than our hero, for his abilities had not yet been tested against them. All of this made her very nervous.

"Listen," she said. "I don't think we should be here now. Can you please get this over with so we can go home?"

"Relax, Ava," answered Henry. "You'll both be warm soon enough. I promise! Hee, hee . . ." He stopped when they got to Snake Mountain. "Well, here we are! Surprise!"

He directed our hero's attention up to the fruit at the top. The sunlight glimmered through it. It looked beautiful—and so delicious. But our hero wasn't excited. If anything, he just looked sad.

"Hmm? What's wrong?" asked Henry. "Look! Look! Don't you see it?"

"Yeah, I see it," answered the boy. A cold shiver went down his spine as he remembered all his friends who had climbed and fallen.

"You mean, you know about this fruit?"

"Yes," the boy answered, lowering his eyes. "I'm sorry, Henry. I know you were wanting to surprise me. But I've been here before. I know about this place. I have for a long time. But that fruit is impossible to get. Snakes live there. I've seen them. They're very dangerous. One bite can kill. They guard it day and night. Not even birds will fly up there. It's hopeless. I'm sorry . . ."



“Yeah,” added Ava. “What kind of surprise is this? We know about this place. Everyone does! This is what you wanted to show him? Come on, kid. Let’s go. Henry, it was nice knowing you. Do us a favor now and buzz off.”

Ava turned to walk away and signaled the boy to follow, but Henry wasn’t finished with them yet.

“Ho! Ho! Ho!” he laughed, clapping his paws together.

“What?” asked Ava.

“Did you really think that showing you this fruit would be my surprise?”

“You did say ‘surprise,’ Henry,” answered the boy, confused.

“Yes, but it wasn’t the FULL surprise. You haven’t yet seen that.”

“Well, get on with it then!” yelled Ava at him. She was getting very impatient with all his games. “We don’t have all day!”

“Patience, my friends! Patience!” he chuckled. “It will happen any moment now.”

Our hero was intrigued. What could he possibly be waiting for?

“I discovered it two years ago,” Henry continued, “as I was walking in these parts, not too far from here. Walking and singing my favorite song! Ahem! Ahem!

*I hear a buzzing!
And buzzing means there’s bees.
And if there are bees buzzing!
Then there must be hon-ey.
And if there is honey!
Way up in this tree.
Then that means the honey . . .
Must certainly be for me!*

“Gah, hah! Come on! Sing it with me! You know the words!”

But the boy didn’t know that song at all and just looked confused. Ava didn’t look like she wanted to sing either. So, he just went back to telling his story.

“Ahem! Well! Anyway! As I was saying . . . after I—uh—asked for the honey very politely, the bees were generous enough to give me some. I took it to this spot so I could sit and eat it. I gazed up and saw the fruit! Oh, how delicious it looked! Perfect for winter! See how it glows! But, drat! So high up! Too high! And so very dangerous to climb too! Especially at my time of life! I almost left at that moment. It seemed like an impossible task, as you said. But then—and I don’t know what it was—something inside me told me to wait just a little longer. So, I did. And that’s when it happened!”

Henry started wagging his stubby little tale as he recalled it. Our hero’s eyes lit up curiously.

“What, Henry? You saw what?”

“Well, take a look, my boy! And see for yourself!”

Our hero and Ava looked at each other confused and shrugged. Neither of them saw anything out of the ordinary. Snake Mountain seemed as it always was—barren and dry. But then, suddenly, a cold gust of wind swooshed down into the valley from the approaching storm. A wind so strong that it frightened the vultures and even toppled a few of their nests. They all began cackling and fleeing. Then the wind hit Snake Mountain. You could hear it whistle as it passed through the little holes. That’s when our hero and Ava saw what Henry was talking about.

Terrified and frozen, all of the snakes suddenly slithered out of the mountain. They came out and down the slope. They raced right past our heroes and Henry, and down into the ground wherever there were open spaces. It wasn’t long until Snake Mountain appeared entirely empty. But the fruit in the tree near the top was still intact. Our hero and Ava were left utterly astonished.

"Hah, hah!" laughed Henry. He began dancing and prancing around, tickling and pinching himself more. "Ooh, hoo, hoo! Heehee! Look! Look! It worked! It happened again! I knew it! I knew it! Look! Snake Mountain is empty!"

"Wow . . ." gasped the boy in amazement. "Yeah, you're right. It sure looks like it."

At first, Ava thought it was just a stupid trick that only two stupid animals like Henry and our hero could possibly be amused by. But then she started to realize what Henry was doing—and became very upset.

"Hey! Wait a minute! This is your big surprise? You want to climb up there?"

"What? Me! Hah!" Henry cackled. "You must be joking. Look at me! I could never get up there. My paws are too big to grip the holes. And at my time of life!"

"Oh, so you want him to go and get it for you then? Is that it?"

"I never said that," answered Henry. "But now that you mention it, it does sound like an interesting idea . . . doesn't it, sonny?"

"Oh, please. You expect us to believe that? No—you planned this whole thing out, didn't you? Let me guess. You didn't prepare for winter. You want us to do your work for you. Well, you can forget it."

"Ava," sighed Henry, offended. "I would never ask either of you to do a thing like that for me. I brought you here so that you two could have it, not me."

"Why!?"

"Why? Well, because you're my friends! Right, bucko?" he said, turning to the boy. Our hero agreed.

"I don't believe it!" answered Ava. "A bear dragging someone all the way out here just to be generous? No, you're up to something! I know it!"

Henry crossed his arms and looked very hurt by her words.

"Besides," Ava continued, "even if he were to climb up there—how is he supposed to get it down? Did *that* thought ever cross your brain?"

"Now, now, Ava," chuckled Henry. "Look, I wouldn't expect you to understand. But some of us like helping others. Don't we, my boy?" Our hero nodded. "And, of course, I've thought of that! How would he get it down? What a silly question! Why don't you open your eyes and see? Look! Right over here!"

Henry strutted over to a small but deep pool of water that was located beneath where the fruit hung. He dipped his paw in and splashed them with it just to make sure they knew he wasn't lying.

"Hah! You see, laddy? You can drop it right in here. The water will break its fall. Easy!"

The boy ran over and inspected it for himself. It was indeed under the fruit. It seemed wide and deep enough. Everything checked out.

"It's perfect!" he yelled out. "You know what? I think it could actually work!"

"Exactly! You see? Your old Uncle Henry came through, just like he said!"

Henry messed up his hair and splashed him some more. Our hero laughed wildly and then threw himself into the bear's arms, giving him a big hug.

"Oh, Henry! Thank you! I love the surprise! You're so smart! You're the best bear in the world! Thank you! I love you!"

For a moment, Henry felt a little guilty, reader. His plan was working perfectly. As bad a bear as he was, there was something about the boy that sometimes made him feel warm and fuzzy. He didn't like the feeling. But he had to pretend to.

"Aww . . ." he finally said. "Thank you . . ." He patted our hero on the head and proceeded to pry him off. "But you'd better hurry. Look! It's growing colder every

minute! Winter is coming. The edges of the pond are beginning to freeze. You don't have much time. If you wait any longer, whatever falls here will be squashed—and become a frozen jelly popsicle!”

He licked his lips and smiled. Our hero looked over at the approaching storm and agreed. But Ava still wasn't buying it. And she was growing more frustrated.

“No!” she barked and growled. “You mustn't do this! The storm is too close. Even if you managed to get to the top, and even if there are no snakes left, there is no time! It's too dangerous. We're running late as it is! I can't believe how foolish you two are. You're so—”

But as Ava became enraged and began to scold him, as Henry predicted she would, the clever bear put his paw on the boy's shoulder and began whispering.

“Aww . . . Ava really does care about you, doesn't she? Look at how protective she is. I think that's what I would miss most about her, wouldn't you?”

This caught our hero's attention and made him completely stop listening to whatever Ava was saying.

“Yeah . . .” he nodded sadly.

Henry frowned and continued.

“Oh, I can't bear the thought of Ava starving again. The illness it caused. Then you would be alone. I'm sure you can imagine what that might be like. Have you thought about it sometimes? Being alone?” The boy nodded again and lowered his eyes. “Yes, I thought so. Me too. Wouldn't feel very good knowing you could have prevented it, either.”

“No . . .” our hero squeaked.

Ava just kept ranting angrily, not noticing what Henry was doing.

“But you can,” whispered Henry. “I know you want to. Because you're such a good, good boy. You don't want to be responsible for anyone dying, do you?”

“No . . .”

“Especially a slow and painful death. This is your friend!”

“Yeah . . .”

Tears were starting to form in his eyes.

“Well,” sighed Henry. “Then I think you know what you have to do. Climb it, son. Don’t let her die like this! Save her! Choose life! It’s in your power. I’ve seen you climb. You’re SO good at it. You can do it! I know you can. It will only take a minute if you hurry. But you mustn’t delay any longer. Please . . . I beg you . . . I don’t want us to lose her either. Do it for me too!”

Henry had our hero almost shaking in sadness. He remembered how sick she got last year. He remembered how he felt. He would have done almost anything if he could have.

Ava was midway through her lecture about the danger before she noticed Henry had been talking to him. She became even angrier.

“Hey! Wait a minute! What are you!—” Until she saw the boy’s expression.

He had the same look he did last year in the cave. She knew instantly what Henry must have been whispering to him. She also realized that getting angry wasn’t going to change his mind. Yet, she knew she had to. She walked over. For the very first time in her life, Ava spoke gently to him.

“Don’t worry about me, kid . . . I’ll be fine. Really.”

“That’s what you always say,” our hero despaired. “But things keep getting worse every year—all because of me.”

He hated that he didn’t stop growing and always needed more food.

“Everybody dies one day,” she answered. “It’s just the way it is. We can’t change that. And I’m okay with it. Besides, I’m tougher than you think. I don’t believe I’ll die. I

might not even get sick. We've done good this year. I'm a survivor. I'll be fine. And even if I'm not, you will be."

Henry didn't like what he was hearing. He didn't actually expect her to talk to him this way.

"But neither of us will survive if you climb this mountain now," she continued. "It cannot be done. Not yet! Listen, if you really want to that badly, we can come back next year. We can practice. We'll do it right—plan it out and everything. But not like this. Don't listen to him. Trust me and let it go this time. Let's go home."

Henry was so worried she'd spoiled his plan, he was almost ready to charge and attack them right then and there.

"That blasted wolf!" he thought. "I'll kill her for this! I'll tear her limb from limb! We'll do it the old-fashioned way, if that's what you want!"

But he did not show it. For the boy still didn't seem like he had decided either way.

The boy looked at the storm. It was getting close. He looked at Ava. She looked like she wanted to go home. She wasn't even mad at him anymore. He looked at Henry, who did his best to smile. Then, he cast his eyes down. He was out of time. He had to choose. So, he thought—which is something, as you know, he really wasn't good at—and he made a very, very silly decision.

"I'm sorry, Ava. I . . . can't . . . I just can't bear the thought of losing you because of me—because I was too scared. I'm sorry. But don't worry. I'm going to get it. You'll see. I'll climb up and cut it down. We'll have lots to eat this winter. You will be okay. I promise."

And with that, Henry and Ava's feelings switched. Now, she felt like tearing Henry apart, and he felt better again.

"Oh! Good! Good! Good, boy! Yes, you can do it!" he said comforting him.

Our hero was expecting Ava to get angry again. But instead, she just looked heartbroken.

"Fine . . ." she sighed, giving up. She knew there was no stopping him now. If she stalled him any longer, it would only make it more dangerous for him. "Go . . . if you must. But . . . please . . . please . . . be careful."

Henry couldn't help smiling and giggling. "Don't worry," said our hero. "I'll be up and down in no time!" And he ran off. "Trust me! I'll be right back!"

Chapter 10

The Fall

The forest was growing colder every minute. A blanket of snow covered the tree tops. Animals scurried to their burrows and caves. Those who weren't prepared either froze or were buried.

Our hero heard the howling storm approaching, but it did not scare him. He felt the cold air run up his spine, but he did not flinch or shiver. He thought of only one thing: getting up Snake Mountain to get the fruit, so he could save his beloved friend from starvation.

"You know," remarked Henry to Ava, as the boy began his ascent. "I never did understand why you, of all animals, get so ill in winter. You're a wolf. You can go out and find food for yourself. There's plenty to eat—rabbits, foxes, squirrels. All your favorites!"

"I don't eat those," Ava replied. "Not anymore."

"Oh, yes . . . that's right. I forgot! You've changed! You no longer eat any of the nice little creatures. But there are others. Lynxes . . . the polar bears . . . and—"

"I know that."

But the problem was Ava couldn't handle them one on one. She wasn't even sure she could take them with help of the boy. He may have been strong, but he was slow and clumsy in the snow. He wasn't yet fully grown and adapted to the cold. Without a pack, and considering how much longer it took wounds to heal in winter, it was safer to remain in the cave, enduring with little.

"Oh, yes . . . I forgot about that too. You'd be alone out there! You know, that's the other thing I've often wondered. I've always wanted to ask. Don't you miss it sometimes? Being in a pack?"

"No," replied Ava sternly.

"You were certainly in quite the powerful one, I must say. Maul's gang—am I right?"

Ava didn't answer.

"In fact, I've heard you were quite the ranking officer! Ho! Ho! Ho! And even more than that. I heard you two were once—"

"Would you be quiet already! Can't you see I'm trying to watch! Buzz off!"

She ran ahead to get a closer look. Henry followed her, wagging his little tail.

Our hero had only been climbing for a couple of minutes before he realized he was carrying far more than he needed. So, he dropped his staff, boomerang and pouches. It all crashed to the ground.

"There, that's better," he said.

The holes in the mountain fit his hands and feet perfectly. It was simply a matter of finding the fastest way up, for there were some areas with more holes than others and some patches with no place to grasp at all. He soon discovered there were also some old roots that grew down the side. If he reached one, he could use it like a rope and cover a lot of distance. He tried to reach those whenever he could. Though, he had to be careful. Some were rotten and would snap! He had a few close calls that made Ava very, very nervous as she watched.

"Wow! He's going pretty fast!" laughed Henry. "Faster than I expected! He's already halfway up! You've trained him well. You should be proud!"

"I told you to be quiet! I'm not interested in talking to you, okay? Just leave me—"

But then something caught Ava's attention. "What? Oh no!" And she started running towards the mountain, barking. "Hey! Hey! Look out! Look out!"

Our hero only heard it faintly.

"Hmm . . . that's strange," he said. "Ava never barks—unless there's trouble. Is she okay?"

He looked down and saw her running around frantically.



“Ava! What is it?” he yelled down. “Is something wrong? Hey, look how far I’ve climbed! I’m doing good! I’m alright, see?”

Henry, of course, was enjoying all of this. He broke into another fit of laughter. Then, Ava got the idea to run in the direction she wanted him to look. Finally, she got him to turn his head.

“Ahh!” he yelled. Suddenly, out of nowhere, another storm cloud had formed. It was halfway between him and the greater storm that was already coming, meaning he had only half the time he previously thought. “Wow! No way! Where did THAT come from!?”

As far as Ava was concerned, it was over. It would be impossible to make it up and down in time now. It was

moving fast and even more violently, like a tornado in the sky. His only option was to give up.

"You can do it, laddy!" Henry then called out. "I believe in you! You can do it! Climb! Hurry! You must go fast! Look! You're already half way!"

"Would you shut up!" growled Ava. "What are you trying to do? Look! It's over! Stop encouraging him!"

Henry just laughed.

"Brah! Hah! Hah! Muah, hah, hah, hah, hah!"

Our hero had to make a decision. He looked up and thought about it. He looked down and thought some more. He looked back up again. He looked back down. Then he looked at his fingers, trying to calculate whether he had enough time. But he couldn't do the math.

"Uh . . . hmm . . . let's see here . . . hmm . . . umm . . . Ah, whatever!" he finally decided. "I'm going to keep going! I can do it! I know I can. I must!"

Henry saw him begin climbing again and started dancing around to celebrate, wagging his behind and cheering.

"Ooh! Hoo! Hoo! Haw, haw! Ho! Ho! Ho!"

Ava would have attacked him if she wasn't so worried about her friend.

"I can do it . . ." the boy repeated to himself. "I can do it . . ." He kept going faster and faster, thinking of how good it would feel to finally reach the top! The proud look on Ava's face as he got it down! "I can do it! Just a little further. I'm almost there!"

As the storm cloud got closer, however, the air grew much colder. Our hero's fingers numbed. His joints stiffened. He became slower and struggled to grip the rock. Then the snow came. It whipped against his skin. Some of it melted—and then froze. A layer of ice began to form over him, just as it was forming over the pond below. It got into his eyes and caused his lids to stick. He had to wipe them over and over.

Soon, the cloud began to surround him. He couldn't see the bottom anymore. Nor could Ava and Henry see him. The only light now came from the flashes as the storm intensified. The thunder and howling of the wind deafened him, sounding like a train screeching and grinding on tracks—coming straight towards him! Before long, he couldn't see anything—not even the fruit. But he knew he was getting close.

From down below, it looked like a tidal wave in the sky crashing against the shore. And still, the worst of it hadn't reached him.

The point soon came when our hero couldn't climb any longer. It was so cold and windy he knew he would be blown off if he dared move one of his hands or feet. But, feeling the storm getting worse, he knew that, soon, he was going to get blown off anyway. So, he took his chances and, with all of his might, threw himself up, hoping there would be something, anything he could hold onto. In mid jump, he nearly got sucked away! But, somehow, by some blind stroke of luck, his hand caught the branch of the fruit tree.

He was now flailing like a flag on a pole, no idea whether he was being blown up, down or sideways. He knew only that he had made it. He was almost there!

"Come on . . ." he moaned. "Don't give up now!"

Lightning struck next to our hero. He flinched and almost let go. With every ounce of remaining strength, he pulled himself up through the torrent, got a leg up and wrapped himself around the branch.

It was so loud he couldn't hear his own cries—or even his thoughts. Nor could he breathe. The storm sucked away the air in front of him—sometimes right out of his lungs. All he could do was hang on now. There was nowhere left to go.

The last thing he remembered was looking up at the fruit on the tree. It was plump, bright and red—half-cov-

ered in snow. But behind the fruit, where the wind was blowing from, was darkness. He saw the snow blowing in his face. He saw the black center coming towards him. Lightning flared all around it! It kept getting closer and colder and louder! He longed to cover his ears for fear his head would explode—but how could he let go of the branch? Then he saw a bright light.

A moment later, the branch snapped! With our hero half-conscious, wrapped around the trunk, the whole thing launched from the cloud like a cannon. On fire, it skipped down the mountain-side, slamming into the jagged rock over and over. Finally, it plunged into the pond. The ice shattered—along with most of our hero's bones.

Chapter 11

Henry Changes

Our hero awoke under freezing cold water, unable to move. He didn't remember how he got there or even whether he was dreaming. All he knew was that he couldn't breathe—and he began to panic.

Fortunately, Ava found him just in time. She dove in and pulled him out onto the snow. He coughed up water. It froze as soon as it hit the air. That's when the pain returned. All at once, every bone in his body felt like it was on fire. He cried out in agony.

"Quiet!" growled Ava. She was relieved he was alive, but terrified he would attract more danger. Winter's predators always accompanied the first storm. They needed to get out of there as soon as possible. She could check on him later. "Can you stand?"

Our hero could not. He couldn't even move—but only whimper.

"Agh! Ava . . ."

He started tugging on her fur with the only arm that worked.

"What?" she asked coldly.

"I'm . . . I'm sorry . . ."

"Never mind that, now. Just keep quiet. We'll have to carry you." She kept looking over her shoulder and sniffing the air.

"O . . . okay . . ." the boy squeaked.

"Henry, come and give me a hand," Ava called out. But there was no answer. "Henry?" She looked around for him. He was standing in the snow, not moving, not talking, not even blinking. No expression on his face either. He just stood there, staring.

"H-h-Henry . . ." the boy whimpered. "I'm sorry. I couldn't . . . get it. P-please . . . help me . . ."

But he still wasn't responding. It made Ava very ner-

vous. She knew that look in his eye. She'd seen it in animals before. Finally, after it became perfectly clear our hero wasn't getting back up, he spoke. His voice sounded very different from before—lower and more serious.

"Step aside, Ava. You know the rules. Look at him. He's useless. He can no longer serve any purpose."

Our hero didn't understand, but Ava did.

"He's fine! He's just hurt, that's all."

"Gah hah! Just hurt? Please! Look at him! He won't last the night—and you know it."

The boy couldn't believe what he was hearing.

"Henry . . ." he whimpered. "W-what are you saying? We're friends!"

"Friends? Friends!? No, child. I don't have any friends."

"But . . . you said . . . you told me . . . and what about—"

"But nothing! I tricked you! Get it? I pretended to be your friend. Those were all lies! I just wanted to eat you! That's why I brought you here. Gah hah! I knew you'd be dumb and desperate enough to climb! I knew you'd fall. And now, you're mine!"

You could almost hear our hero's heart break in two. His eyes filled with tears. The pain was even worse than his broken bones.

"No!" growled Ava. "Over my dead body."

"But I want him."

"Well, you can't have him."

"Why?"

"Because I won't let you."

"Why!?"

"Because—he's too important."

"WHY?"

"I don't know why!" said Ava. "I just know he is and that's enough. You can't have him. Not him. And if you try, you'll have to go through me."

"Fine," snarled Henry. "Let us settle it the old way. By the ancient law of combat, I will claim him."

He lifted his massive paw and drew out his claws. They were like a set of razor-sharp hooks. He smiled with all of his teeth. Ava bared hers as well. Her hackles shot up. She bent low, ready to charge. Henry charged first.

"Grawr!" he shouted, like a battle cry. He began snorting and squealing like a pig with each stride. *Snort, snort, snort! Wee! Wee!* Then, he bellowed and roared like a bull. *Moo!*

Ava ducked under his paw as he swiped at her. It would have taken her head clean off. She bit into his side, tearing out a chunk of his flesh.



"Agh!" he cried. "Why, you little!" And he used his other paw to backhand her across the jaw. She flew into the snow. Ava felt dizzy after that, and before she could get up, Henry charged again. He headbutted her this time. She flew through the air and landed in the pond, the same pond she had pulled our hero from. Henry laughed evilly and snorted some more.

"Brah! Hah! Hah! *Snort, snort, snort.* Where are you? *Snort, snort.*" Henry went to the pond and found her. He

sunk his claws into her and pulled her out. “Ah! Hah! Gotcha! Heh! Heh! Heh!”

He held her up, thinking she was defeated. But she suddenly squirmed free enough to slash him across his left eye. Henry wailed and howled in pain. But it wasn’t enough to make him let go. He still held Ava in his clutches—and now he was angry.

“Agh! My eye! So, you want to fight dirty, huh?”

He dunked her back under the water and held her there.

“Thought that was pretty funny, didn’t yeh!” he growled.

Our hero saw his friend flapping and struggling. Henry was drowning her. The boy knew she didn’t have much time. Henry started laughing again.

“Brah! Hah, hah, hah! Look at her squirm! Having fun under there? Hee, hee, hee!”

The boy looked around. What could he do? That’s when he saw his spear. It wasn’t far. Maybe he could use his one good arm to crawl and get it. Maybe he could get Henry when he wasn’t looking. Slowly, the boy crawled towards it, trying the best he could not to whimper from the pain.

“Die! Die!” Henry cried out. “Muah! Hah! Hah! Hah!”

Sometimes he would pull her out and give her a quick breath. But it was only because he wanted more time to enjoy drowning her. “Ho! Ho! Ho!”

Finally, our hero made it to his spear. But he couldn’t stand up. Even holding it hurt. Still, he knew he had to save his friend. So, with the little strength he had left, he turned himself onto his back and launched his staff like a javelin. He could feel his broken bones move and the cuts on his body open up more. It hit Henry, but wasn’t nearly strong enough to stop him. At least it distracted him enough to save Ava.



"Agh!" Henry yelped. He spun around with fury in his eyes and looked at the boy like he was going to charge him next. He lifted Ava out and slammed her on the ground.

"Now," he growled. She couldn't move. "I want you to watch this, Ava. I want you to see me eat him. I want you to hear his cries and begging. I'll start with his toes. Then his legs! Then his knees! His fat little belly! And last, his face!"

Henry looked thoroughly like a monster now. He licked his lips and began kicking his back leg like a bull ready to charge. He let out a bellow. Our hero was frozen in fear. Then Henry ran at him—snorting and oinking like a pig again. *Snort, snort, snort. Wee! Wee! Moo!* Ava was down. Our hero had no more defenses. He was helpless. *Wee! Wee! Snort, snort, snort!* Henry ran right on top of the boy and then stood up on both his hind legs, like a giant. He looked down and roared at him.

The sound reminded the boy of being up in the storm. It was over. He knew it. He closed his eyes and braced himself for his doom. But just before Henry struck, he heard a sound in the distance . . .

It was howling. Not Ava's howling. Ava couldn't howl like that. This was something different. Henry recognized it.

"No . . . no . . ." he stuttered. He crouched down and listened again, unsure of whether it was real or just the wind. But then he heard it again. "Oh, no! He's here! Maul and his pack!"

Maul was no ordinary wolf, reader. He was far bigger and stronger. Many didn't believe he was a wolf at all, but a monster who was hiding in one. Even Henry was scared of him. Shuddering and trembling, he put his claws away and took off running as fast as he could.

"He's gone," Ava groaned. "Good riddance."

The boy was sprawled out, already half-buried in the

snow. It reminded Ava of when she first found him as a baby.

"Now," she said. "Listen! You've got to get up. We've got to go. Henry is gone. But Maul will be here soon. He's a thousand times worse. I can't take him by myself. His pack will track us down and find us."

"I can't, Ava," our hero whined. "Look at me. I can't even move. Just leave me. I don't mind. Like you said, everybody dies."

"Enough of that!" she barked. "Move it, I said! I never asked for your opinion! On your feet, soldier! NOW!"

"Ugh . . . okay . . ." he squeaked. "I'll . . . try."

"That's it!"

He tried to pick himself up, but just collapsed. Then they heard more howls. Ava knew the wolves would be there any second.

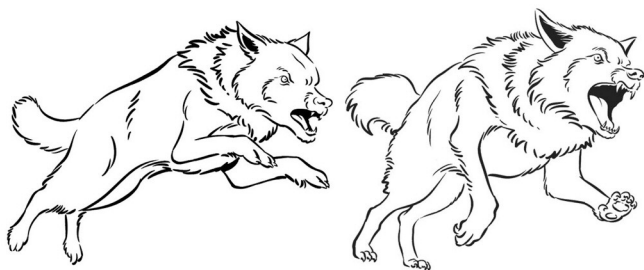
"Grr! Get up!" she barked, losing all patience. "GET UP! GET UP! GET UP! NOW!"

He tried again—but failed and fell even harder this time. Now he was screaming in pain.

"I can't!" our hero cried. "I can't . . . I'm sorry!"

"Blast!" said Ava. "Fine. Have it your way. I'll carry you myself." She got down, bit into his arm and threw him over her shoulder, onto her back. "Hold on," she commanded him. "And bite down on my fur if you need to. This is going to hurt—a lot. And you're going to need to be quiet. No more of this whining." And she took off at full speed.

Ava hurried with him through the rest of Snake Valley and into the woods that led to their cave. She could hear the wolves growling and hungrily panting behind her, snapping at their heels. Weaving through the trees, she leaped over some of the traps the boy had laid. Two of the wolves got caught in them. She kicked a third down a pit with spikes at the bottom. There was still no sign of Maul, but she could smell that he was close.



Finally, she reached the secret back entrance to the cave. Just before the pack followed her in, she hit a switch the boy had made. Large, jagged stones dropped from the ceiling, crushing several more. Darkness and silence followed then, and our hero couldn't tell whether he had lived or died.

Chapter 12

The Cave



Ava hauled the boy through over three miles of darkness before arriving at their lair. She dropped him. He was too out of breath to cry and in too much pain to faint. All he could do was lay there wild-eyed, wheezing and quivering.

It was a simple cave. There was one room, four stone walls and a low ceiling. But it was also very colorful. Each wall was covered with paintings. Some were of himself and Ava. Others were of trees, flowers or other things he liked. But most of them were pictures of inventions he designed, like new weapons, traps or gliders. Beneath were scattered tools, parts and all the failed attempts to build them. There was a corner in his cave for food and another for wood. Near the front and back entrances were racks of various weapons. The fire pit was in the middle, next to where he slept.

Ava sniffed around the cave and inspected the front entrance to make sure there were no intruders. She went outside, where there was a little terrace that overlooked the great valley. Their cave was on the side of a mountain. All the paths up to the terrace were blocked or booby-trapped and the ice building up at the bottom would make it very difficult for anyone to climb. For now, they were safe.

Ava descended again and went over to the wood pile. She put a few logs together then brought over some flint.

"Here," she said, handing it to him.

With his one working arm and the very last of his strength, he reached out and struck it against another rock to make a spark. He felt some more of the broken bones in his body shift as he did so, but still didn't have enough breath to cry out. Instead, he just collapsed again. He wouldn't be moving anymore that night.

The spark caught fire. Ava shuffled it closer to him and examined his wounds. It was bad. Very bad. Both his legs were broken in different spots. One arm was broken. He had deep gashes, scrapes and burns. But she didn't say anything. Then, she went to their food pile and brought over his favorite dish. A big smelly fish with some strawberry jam.

"Eat," she said coldly. "You'll need your strength."

"S-s-strength?" muttered the boy. "F-f-for what?"

"For the pain. I need to straighten you out and clean your wounds. It's going to hurt."

Our hero chuckled. Or was he crying? Ava couldn't tell. It was going to hurt? More pain? What did that even mean? He felt like he was already in as much pain as possible.

"Eat!" Ava insisted, this time with a growl. But our hero refused.

"No!" He looked at her with fury and defiance in his eyes. "Leave me . . . alone."

Ava glared at him. He glared right back. Then finally, she gave in.

"Fine," she said. "Well . . . aren't we grouchy today?" She turned around and put the food back onto the pile. "But I guess I shouldn't be surprised. You've always been a picky eater, ever since you were a baby. A spoiled little brat. Always whining and complaining. Nothing was ever good enough for you. Even though I brought you nothing but the best gourmet meals."

"Oh, please," groaned the boy. "Gourmet meals? You

brought me chewed up worms and slugs! I hated that gruel! Ouch!”

It hurt to talk, but Ava knew she had to do something to keep his mind off the pain, or he’d faint and never wake up. Even worse, he looked like he wouldn’t have minded. She had to keep him attentive and alert.

“Any wolf cub would have been happy to get such a meal.”

“Well, fine—but I wasn’t a wolf!”

“Indeed. You were a frail, little, ugly weakling—bald and babbling. I was so disappointed. How in the world was I going to turn something so pathetic and useless into a soldier?”

“You could have started by protecting me! I was only a baby. The bugs . . . I remember you sitting there, doing nothing, letting them eat me.”

“You deserved it,” replied Ava. “Served you right for letting them. Besides, you needed to learn. Life is war. And you did learn.” Then Ava’s eyes started to light up and she smiled. “Ah, yes! I still remember it! You made your first tiny little fist. You slammed it into them, one by one. Crushed your enemies! Crawled all around the cave! Destroyed them utterly!” Ava almost had tears in her eyes as she recalled it. “Your first genocide . . . I was so proud . . .”

“You’re . . . insane . . .” answered the boy. He looked away and closed his eyes like he didn’t want to talk about it anymore.

“Well,” said Ava. “You say that now. But there is a method to my madness. You have to admit—it came in handy the time the bat attacked you.”

This got his attention again. He looked up at Ava surprised.

“What? The bat? You were there . . . when the bat attacked me?” Ava smiled and nodded at him. “But it al-

most killed me. You were there? Watching? As that THING tried to eat me alive!?”

Though our hero was only about one year old at the time, he remembered it like it was yesterday. He had exterminated and consumed all the bugs he could find in the cave and felt like he could finally get a good night's sleep. He found some comfortable mud to lie in. But in the middle of the night, he felt something sniffing and licking behind his ear. He thought it was the big furry creature. That was what he called Ava. But when he reached beside himself to touch the phantom, he felt leathery skin . . . a fuzzy belly . . . and a little crinkly face . . . with two sharp fangs. It squealed at him as it attacked.

“Ahh!” he remembered screaming. “Help! Help!” These were our hero's first words. “Help! Help! Helllp!” But none answered.

“I can't believe it,” said the boy. “I thought you were away at the time. You were THERE? And you did NOTHING!?”

“Why would I? I was testing you.”

“A test?”

“Yes. I wanted to see how you'd react when faced with an opponent your own size. Would you curl up into a ball, and let yourself be destroyed—or fight? And I wasn't disappointed. It had you on your back. You were losing! But then I saw the anger build up. Oh, you had a rage inside you, boy. You grabbed that bat by his two big stupid ears and pushed him off. Then you got on top of him and gave him a taste of his own medicine. You made your little fist again and bashed his brains in with it! And then you ate his brains! Slurped em right up!” Ava made a slurp sound as she told the story, making our hero cringe. “Then you tore him to pieces and found his heart. You ate it whole. It was . . . magnificent. And the bats never bothered you again after that, did they?”

“No.”

"It's then I knew you had real potential. But there was still one last test."

"The climb," the boy muttered, remembering.

"Yes."

Our hero endured many months in the cave, surrounded by darkness, freezing temperatures and the worst imaginable smells. His baby food was vomit, worms and bugs—all of which made him ill. The air felt poisonous. He was always coughing and his skin was bumpy and itchy from getting bitten.

Eventually, he started exploring. He felt his way along the cave floor. He found rocks, bones and soon the stone walls of the cave.

He discovered two special walls as well. One was black and the other was white. The black wall frightened him. It was colder and quieter. He heard bats there—flapping, squeaking and giggling.

"Join us . . ." they whispered to him.

"Come down and play . . . Tee hee!"

He scurried away and never went near it again.

But the white wall was different. It was warm and pretty. The air nearby was fresher. It sent down all kinds of curious echoes and shadows. Sounds and shapes of things he'd never seen or heard before. It made him curious and want to approach. But it was at the top of a path too steep to climb. Every time he tried, he fell and hurt himself.

"It didn't occur to you to help at all?" our hero answered as Ava cleaned his wounds. "Agh! Ouch! Ouch!" It was working. The talk was keeping him awake and distracted. But she still needed more time.

"No, it didn't," she continued. "As I said, you needed to learn. There is no 'help' out here. You needed to learn to help yourself. And if you couldn't help yourself—because you were too weak—then you needed to learn to

become strong. And you did learn this too—when the pain eventually became unbearable.”

Our hero remembered it well. Life got even harder for him down there. Much of it was because there weren’t any diapers or bathrooms. As you can imagine, it started smelling very bad very quickly and began attracting swarms of new bugs. They joined forces and waged constant, perpetual war upon him. The only way he survived was to cover himself in thick oozing mud.

This was also when the nightmares started to come. Our hero began having horrifying dreams about being a bat. His face would be crinkly! He’d have pointed ears, leathery skin and fangs! All day long, he’d hang upside down at the black wall, squeaking! He would wake up in a panic and check himself to make sure it wasn’t real. But that was the scariest part of all. He couldn’t check! It was too dark to see. There were no mirrors. He couldn’t even feel his own skin anymore. Maybe it was true. Maybe he was a bat—or becoming one. The thought of it tormented him just as much as their taunting.

“Join us! Join us!”

“It’s fun being a bat! *Squeak, squeak!*”

He felt like he was starting to go mad. Eventually, he snapped—just as Ava had predicted.

“No!” he cried. This was his second word. He wasn’t going to become one of those things! Nor was he going to become bug food! He had to get to the white wall somehow. He sat up and tore the mud off himself.

“Ah, pain!” sighed Ava, remembering. “Nature’s greatest teacher! Finally, you realized what you needed to do.”

Day and night, our hero crawled as fast as he could around the cave. He crawled back and forth. He crawled in circles. He crawled up on top of things. Even when he skinned his hands and knees and was bleeding all over the floor! It didn’t matter. Nor did it matter how terrible his

food tasted anymore. If insects and gruel gave him energy and made him grow, then that's what he needed to eat. He began stuffing himself with the biggest, juiciest bugs and worms he could find. Even big, hairy spiders! He would throw it all up, of course. But even that didn't stop him. He'd pool it together with his hands and then slurp it up from the floor! He was that desperate to get strong. And it made Ava very proud to watch.

"That isn't all I learned," said the boy, trying not to look as Ava straightened out his bones. "Agh! Ouch!"

"No?"

"No. I learned that the white wall . . . couldn't have been a wall. It was . . . something else—a door."

"How did you figure that out? You had never seen it up close yet."

"I just knew it," he answered. "It was the only thing that made any sense. Why else would I have been so miserable down there? I had desires for things too—things that weren't in the cave. Why would they be in me? Why was it that when I smelled the air from the white wall, my mouth watered? There had to have been food. And if there was food, then it was a place."

The fateful day finally arrived.

"I remember it was storming," our hero recalled. Ava remembered it too. It was the first thunderstorm of spring. "I was scared."

Flashes lit up the cave as if the white wall were angry. Thunder shook the ground like an earthquake. Parts of the ceiling began to crack and crumble. Water poured in like a rushing river, causing a great flood. He had to climb up onto a rock just to keep himself from being washed away—washed down to the black wall where the bats were! The big furry creature got up and began its ascent towards the light, leaving him behind. Now! Now was the time!

Our hero leaped and plunged into the roaring waters. He couldn't swim. And in some parts, when the water had

mixed with the mud, it felt like quicksand pulling him down. But it didn't stop him. He paddled! He willed himself through, all the way, until he got to the foot of the path. He reached and stretched up with his little arms, just like he'd been practicing, dug his fingers into the mud, and hauled himself up using one arm at a time.

It didn't matter that he was sinking or sliding, how blinding the white wall was the closer he got, or that worms were getting in his mouth and bugs in his teeth. It didn't matter that he lost all of his finger nails from having to dig them into the rocks. He wasn't going to stay there any longer! He'd either ascend or be buried trying. Anything but that place. Just thinking of it made him angry. It gave him extra strength during the moments when he would have ordinarily given up. Finally, he reached the top! Emerged victorious! Breathing his first breath of fresh air!

He arrived just as the storm was dispersing and the sun was coming out. The light of it dazzled his senses. He lost his balance and tumbled forth out of the cave entrance onto the grassy terrace.

His eyes were open, but he couldn't see. The light was blinding. He could feel it burning through his eyeballs and brain. But it wasn't a bad pain. It was a good kind. The kind of pain like when our foot falls asleep, and then slowly starts to wake up. That's how his whole head was feeling. And eventually, he did begin to see.

First, he saw the shadows. For he had seen those before in the cave. His eyes were already well-adjusted to them. Then, he saw something new: colors! Greens! Blues! Reds! Next, he saw reflections. He felt a puddle in front of him. He dunked his head in and washed off the mud. He looked at it and saw himself. He wasn't a bat! He was a—well, he didn't know. But he wasn't a bat! And that was very good news. Then, he looked up and saw the whole valley in all its beauty and splendor.

But one thing caught his attention more than anything else. Something bright red and sweet-smelling! It was a big plump strawberry on a little bush. He crawled over and plucked it. He put it in his mouth and bit down, tasting all the sweet juices. Now, his mouth felt like it was waking up! It overwhelmed him and tears of joy began streaming down his face, a feeling he had never felt before. And for the very first time, our hero smiled.

“You are a very odd creature, aren’t you?” said Ava to him then, as she was watching. Those were her first words to him. The boy heard her voice and looked up. So, that’s what the big furry creature looked like. He stared at her in amazement and smiled even bigger, his face covered with red mush. “But you know, this isn’t the end. It is only the beginning. You are destined to become a soldier.” Our hero had no idea what she was talking about at that age. But he liked the sound of her voice. “Enjoy your strawberries, little one. Rejoice. You have earned them.” Then, she walked away to leave him alone more. “Just don’t get too comfortable. Your training starts tomorrow. That’s when the real pain begins.”

Our hero sat there all afternoon, admiring the view. But he wondered where the white door had gone. He looked around for it. Finally, he turned his eyes up. What he saw startled him so much that he dropped his strawberries. There was that burning feeling again! He had to use his hands to block it this time. What was the white door doing up there? Our hero then learned that he’d been mistaken once again. It wasn’t a door. It wasn’t a wall. It was what he would soon come to call “the sun.” And he learned it was a very special thing too! For not only was it a thing he saw, but the thing by which he saw everything else. It was the giver of light and warmth and strawberries—and therefore the best thing of all. He sat staring at it. Then, the moon—and eventually the stars.

The boy was so young then. He only remembered bits

and pieces. Recalling that triumphant day used to bring him joy. But now it just made him sad. He was back where he started! Weak! Helpless! Half-blind in the dark and in constant pain.

"Why are you telling me all this?" he asked.

"Because," answered Ava. "You seem to have forgotten."

She finished cleaning and straightening out his wounds.

"I haven't forgotten," said the boy.

"Then why don't you eat anything? Why do you have that look, like you've given up?"

"Because," he answered. "Even if I do survive, what then?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean—look around! Look at my life . . ."

"What about it? It's a good life. A lot better than most have."

"I know. But that isn't what I—"

"You chose this life. You wanted to be the guardian. That comes with risks. You knew that ever since you started."

"It isn't the fighting I'm talking about. It's after. I like what I do. It's just—something's not right. I don't have a home."

"This is your home."

"No, it isn't. I'm sure of it." Our hero looked around. "I'm not happy here."

"Well, we've searched everywhere else for something better."

"Have we?" our hero asked. "I'm not sure."

He realized that once he started protecting others, he'd stopped looking. But did they really search everywhere? If he desired it, then maybe—just like the strawberry—that was a sign it was still out there somewhere. His imagination started to run wild thinking about what it

might be like. Ava noticed such thoughts started bringing color back to his face. His breathing returned to normal. He looked like his old self again. Maybe, she thought, that would be the key to his surviving.

"I'll tell you what," she said. "I'll make you a deal." Our hero looked up at her and listened. "You get through this winter alive and, come this spring, we will embark on a journey to find this place you speak of."

"Really?" The boy's eyes lit up.

Ava nodded.

"Alright," he answered, surprised by the suggestion. His mind started racing again.

"Good. Then you can start with this."

Ava brought over the fish and jam again and dropped it on him. Our hero finally conceded and started eating.

But where would this place be? In what direction? It was nothing but mountains on every side of the valley. If he chose wrongly, they might never find it. He couldn't help feel a little worried.

"Look," said Ava. She caught a glimpse of light from the entrance. "The sunset is coming out. Your favorite. Just in time . . ."

Our hero gazed out of the entrance. The storm was passing. A bright golden light peeked through the clouds and over the horizon.

"Where does it go?" he thought dreamily, just as he had that afternoon on the way back from the Life Tree. "Someplace it's always warm, probably. Someplace it's comfortable. Someplace where there are lots of strawberries—and who knows what else?" Then, it suddenly occurred to him. "Wait a minute—of course! The sun! Towards the sun! Over that horizon!" That was where his next adventure lay! That was where he would find his home. Or, if he couldn't, someone who might be able to help him.

\$10

The **STRANGE!**
ADVENTURES *of*
PHILIP & SOPHIE
The Sword of the Dragon King

BY DREW ELDRIDGE



Wonderous magic!



FEB.13
2025

**WESTER
TALES**

No 2

Chapter 13

Sophie, the Magical Girl from Nibelheim



In a little village at the foot of a mountain, there lived a young girl named Sophie. She was fast asleep in her soft, warm bed and the sun was just beginning to peek through her window. It would have been a very pleasant morning to sleep in. Unfortunately, there was a cat in the house who felt differently.

“Meow . . .” he muttered. “What is this?” The cat had fluffy white fur and was exceptionally plump. He struggled to pull himself onto the girl’s bed. “The sun’s up and she’s still sleeping? Unbelievable—the things I have to put up with!”

He climbed on top of her and wiggled. The whole bed shook with him. “Girl! Ahem! I say, girl! Awake this instant! I am ready for my breakfast!” But it didn’t work. “Hello? Anyone home?” He crept up to her head and nudged it. Still nothing. “Hmph, very well then . . . you’ve left me no choice. Feel my razor-sharp claws!” He drew them and gently combed them down her cheeks. “There, how do you like that? More? Okay . . .” Finally, she began to stir.

The girl was very pretty. She had long blonde hair, blue eyes and large, round spectacles. Every morning, she had to reach for them to see.

"Oh, hello Samson!" she sighed dreamily with a yawn. "Good morning!"

"Good morning?" the cat whined. "What's so good about it? It would be a lot better if I had eaten by now. Look at me! I'm practically starved!"

"Hmm . . . did you have strange dreams too?"

"What? Dreams? No! Are you listening to me? Read my lips, girl! Food!"

"MmmHmm . . . MmmHmm . . . I see," replied Sophie, very interested. She patted him on the head and scratched his chin. Then, she reached forward and gave him a great big hug.

"Ugh! Unhand me! Help!"

"Oh, Samson! I wish I knew what you were really saying," the girl sighed, squeezing him. "Hey, maybe I could finish your portrait today. You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

She rolled out of bed and picked him up.

"No! NO!"

Then she hauled him across the room and plopped him on a pedestal.

"There, that's better. Alright, now hold still!"

She gave him a treat to distract him while she put on his costume.

"Here is your hat!" she sighed. "And here is your sash! And don't forget your little sword!"

He posed handsomely in the hopes of earning another kibble.

"Perfect!"

The whole bedroom was covered with portraits of Samson. In one, he was dressed as a knight in shining armor. In another, he was a scholar with a monocle. The funniest of all was Samson the king. Beside them, were shelves of books she'd written. Though only ten years old, Sophie had already authored hundreds of stories. There were mysteries, romances, fairy tales and even scripts for plays. Every year, she put one on at the village festival.



There were two desks she did this at, each with a great bay window. The larger of the two faced the farmyard. The other overlooked the village and ocean. The rest of her room was buried under props, costumes and even more books.

“There! Finished!” she declared triumphantly. “Well,

what do you think?" She turned it around so he could see. "I call it—Samson the Swashbuckler!"

But the cat just glared at her.

"Hideous!" he meowed indignantly. "Look at the double chin you've given me! And those beady little eyes! I don't look like THAT! Why can't you paint me the other way?"

The only portrait he liked was the one depicting him as a ferocious snow lion. She gave him extra big muscles and laser eyes. Beneath the painting, it read: "The Delight and Terror of the Universe."

"Now, THAT's me!" he said pointing. Then he dove off, hitting the ground with a great thud, and waddled away.

But of all the books in Sophie's room, there was one that was most precious to her. It was precious to everyone in the village. So precious, that it was simply called "The Book." Her people believed it was written by the Creator of the whole world. It contained descriptions of this Creator, an explanation of how and why He created it, lists of rules He wanted people to follow, as well as biographies, poetry, stories and famous letters of people who had done the best job at following those rules.

It was the tradition of everyone in the village to spend some time in the morning not only reading this book, but singing little songs and praying to the Creator as they made beautiful, decorated copies of it they could share with strangers. Sophie herself had a whole shelf of them which she poured her heart into with every pen and needle stroke. As she worked, she'd daydream about all the people who might read them—and their smiles!

But on this morning, young Sophie couldn't help feel a little sad as she approached her desk, for something terrible had recently happened.



An evil king who'd arisen in those lands had made another new law. Book-giving journeys, invitations to Book-giving parties and even mailing them away was now strictly forbidden. No one was allowed in or out of any village. If anyone was caught disobeying, he'd send his armies to destroy them.

Sophie sat down where, out of the corner of her window, she could see his mountain fortress. Black smoke rose from it. Every year, it grew bigger and scarier. She put her hands together and closed her eyes.

"God . . ." she sighed worriedly. "Please help us. Please deliver our people from the Dragon King."

Little did she know, her Creator already had a plan—and she was going to be a part of it!

In the last book, we learned about the young hero of

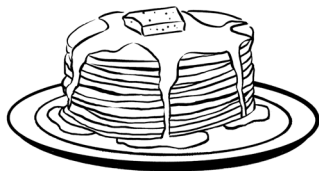
our story: the battle in the Life Tree . . . the journey through the treacherous tunnel to Snake Mountain . . . the betrayal of his friend, Henry the Bear . . . and his tragic fall. He had been left broken and battered on an icy cave floor. It was there he had the idea for his biggest adventure yet—an adventure to the world beyond the horizon. This book is all about our heroine and how she got involved in that adventure too.

Sophie was very different from our hero. Far from being raised by a wolf in the wild, she grew up in a comfortable well-ordered village with a happy family. She never had to eat bugs, fight or kill anyone. Having things like soap, hairbrushes and toothpaste, she looked and smelled much nicer too! But the biggest difference was the power she had. If the hero of our story had “super-strength,” then you could say our heroine had a “super-mind.” A mind that endowed her with certain special abilities.

Unfortunately, these powers were very hard to control and tended to spook people. So, much of her time growing up was spent learning how to conceal them. As *he* was swinging through the branches—galivanting with apes and trying to get stronger—*she* was at home in her arm-chair doing quite the opposite: practicing how to focus and be sneaky. It wasn’t always easy, but by now she was an expert at it! As we follow her along throughout her day, why don’t we see if she can conceal them from you too? Watch our heroine very closely, reader. See if you can guess what her powers are.

Chapter 14

Perfect Pancakes—and Other Mysteries



Sophie finished her prayers early that morning, for an irresistible smell was coming from the kitchen. She got up from her desk and tiptoed to her bedroom door. Slowly, she opened it and peeked outside.

Her mother was cooking her favorite breakfast. There was batter, blueberries and maple syrup on the counter. Samson was standing on his hind legs trying to reach the bacon. There was also a tray of freshly-baked cookies. They were white, with even whiter icing on top! Gooey strawberry filling dripped down the sides! She licked her lips and wondered how she might acquire one without being caught.

Our heroine peeked up at the clock. It read 8:13. Then she looked at her mother. She was strolling around the kitchen, stirring the batter in a little bowl as she checked all the ingredients. She stirred it seven times every six and a half seconds. Then Sophie closed her eyes and just listened. She heard little birds chirping . . . the wind chimes clinking and clanking. She thought about all the other mornings she'd come out to the kitchen. Then, she thought some more. Somehow, reader, in the span of only a few seconds, our heroine could predict the exact moment her mother's back would be turned. Samson watched in awe and with burning jealousy as she casually strolled up and popped a cookie in her mouth.

"Oh! OH! That blasted girl! Why does SHE always

get away with everything? Hey, down here! I want a cookie too!"

"Good morning, Mother," said Sophie picking up a napkin. Her mother's name was Julie. Apart from her being a grown up, the two of them looked almost identical. Even their voices sounded the same.

"Oh, there you are," she replied. "Good morning! Did you sleep well?"

Sophie wandered over to the piano and started playing a little tune.

"I had another odd dream . . ."

"Really? What was it about?"

"I don't know. Something about birds in a nest arguing . . . a grumpy ape . . . a wolf . . . a bear and . . . and . . ."

"And?" asked her mother.

Sophie thought about it and shrugged.

"I guess I forgot."

"You've always had such interesting dreams. Ever since you were little!"

"When I can remember them!"

"Hey, what song is that you're playing? I've never heard it before."

"Hmm. I'm not sure!"

"Is it one you wrote?"

"No, I think it was in the dream."

"Sounds a little sad."

"Yeah, maybe . . ."

"Well, perhaps it would be a good song for one of your plays this year!"

Sophie closed the piano and went over to set the table. Houses were quite a bit smaller and simpler back then. Everything was made of wood, metal or stone. Rooms like the kitchen and dining room were usually joined together. It also took a long time to wash dishes and clothes because everything had to be done by hand. Instead of driving cars, people rode horses or bicycles. But they did have one

thing that we don't. These were special gems called Terra Crystals.

"Can you pass me a yellow, darling? I need to set the timer."

"Sure!"

There were six different kinds. You could find them scattered around the earth, usually deep underground. Each was a distinct color and had a unique power that could be harnessed.

The yellow ones were a little like batteries. You could power a clock, lamp or lighter with them. If you held one in your hand for too long, it would make your hair stand up. If you banged two together, you would see a spark and feel a little shock. Blue Terra Crystals cooled air around them and purified water. The greens made cuts and bruises heal faster. They also made plants grow taller. Red crystals were warm and could catch fire easily. They burned for a very long time without creating any smoke. In winter, people put them in their pockets to keep their hands warm. But you had to be very careful where you left them out. Sophie saw one on her counter that morning a little too close to the sunlight. She hurried over and put it back in the drawer.

Last, there were pink and purple crystals. These were a little different from the others. The purple crystals were called "Chaos Crystals." They were known for causing problems, like mutations and certain kinds of illnesses. This is a part of why no one in Sophie's village ever went over the mountains towards the middle of the continent. Legend had it that a giant Chaos Crystal asteroid once crashed there, giving the continent its strange crater-like shape. The shards in the soil seemed to make the climate more extreme there and attract the most violent, unpredictable storms. It made the trees grow tall and strange, and could make animals unusually strong. As far as anyone on the coast knew,

there weren't any people in the middle. Certainly, no little boys!

Pink crystals didn't really do anything on their own, but they counteracted the purple crystals and could borrow the power of any crystal they were touching. Folks often wore them around their neck for good luck, or slept with them under their pillows for pleasant dreams.

"Expecting someone?" asked Julie, noticing Sophie setting the table for one more.

"Most certainly. Mr. Stanley will be here soon . . ."

Julie looked outside the kitchen window but didn't see anyone. Then she looked out another. Still no one.

"Mail on Sunday?"

Sophie shrugged. She was too focused on making the tea. Mr. Stanley liked it at precisely eighty-seven degrees, with no less than one and three quarters scoops of sugar, except around the holidays. A pretty blue crystal helped Sophie cool it to exactly the right temperature. After she poured the tea, she brought it over to the table. No sooner did it touch the coaster than they heard a knock at the back door.

"That's odd," said Julie.

Our heroine smiled.

Chapter 15

An Unexpected Visit

Mr. Stanley was a tall and thin fellow, dressed all in blue. He had a great big mustache and perfectly white teeth.

“Good morning!” he said, coming in.

Sophie curtsied and welcomed him.

Her mother, however, was still stunned. How did Sophie know he was coming? There were almost never visitors on Sunday mornings. Everyone was too busy getting ready for church. Mr. Stanley never mentioned coming over. Nor had he ever come through the back door before. Yet, at the exact moment Sophie expected him, there he was! But eventually, Julie realized how silly she must have looked standing there. She snapped out of it and welcomed their guest.

“Good morning, Charles! Please, sit down and join us! Sophie made you some tea.”

“Oh,” he said, turning to her. “You knew I was coming?”

The two grown-ups looked at our heroine curiously. The room fell completely silent. Quickly, Sophie had to think of an explanation.

“I . . .” she muttered, “must have seen you out of the window or something.”

That made sense, reader. There were plenty of windows, after all. The grown-ups thought about it for a moment, looked at each other and shrugged. Julie went back to cooking breakfast and Mr. Stanley sat down. A very close call!

Sophie loved to chat with Mr. Stanley in the mornings. She could get all the latest news that way. Who was getting married? Were there any new books? Even little things, like what color someone might have painted their ceiling. Sophie needed to know everything.

"So," she said, sitting down across from him. "Is there any word about the Wilsons?"

"Yes!" he replied, getting excited. "It's a boy!"

Sophie and Julie's eyes lit up. "How wonderful!" they cheered at the same time. Sometimes they seemed more like sisters. It wasn't always clear which of them was more grown up either.

"I wonder what they've named him!" exclaimed Julie, flinging up her mixing spoon. Batter soared through the air and made a big splash. Samson scurried over to lick it up.

"Oh! Can't I run over there now?" Sophie begged. "I'm sure he must be adorable. Eek! I can't wait!"

They both started chattering and giggling hysterically, much to Mr. Stanley's amusement. All of the girls in the village were like that, reader. To the People of the Book, babies were the most lovely and precious gifts.

"Now, be patient you two!" laughed Mr. Stanley heartily. "You'll see him this afternoon! We're having a party after church, remember? There will be a baby shower for the Wilsons—and a wedding for Jonathan and Beth!"

"And we can't forget about Fred and Elizabeth's anniversary," added Julie, finally beginning to calm down. "Fifty years they've been married!"

"Has it been fifty years?" asked Mr. Stanley.

"Indeed!"

"Goodness! Time does fly! Which reminds me—" Mr. Stanley then started digging into his pocket. "It's why I came. I was wondering if you could take a look at this for me, Sophie. It's for my wife."

He pulled out a piece of paper and handed it to our heroine. She opened it eagerly.

"How lovely! A poem!"

"You always were such a romantic, Charles!" remarked Julie, trying not to spill more of the batter.

"Well, it's supposed to be a poem," Mr. Stanley answered. "I know what I want to say. I've got it all there. But, alas, I cannot rhyme! And it just doesn't sound right when I try. It's our anniversary soon too, you see. I want to surprise her! But what a mess it is! Would you take a look at it for me, Sophie, and just—you know—do your thing?"

"I would be honored!" she answered.

"Thank you! Thank you!"

She already had three or four ideas, but she got the feeling like Mr. Stanley still had more to say.

"And," he continued, blushing. He was such a kind man. Sophie liked him a lot. "If I might ask just one more thing of you . . ."

"Anything," she answered.

"Might I take some flowers from your garden? It's why I came through the back door. You always have the best flowers in the village! When I looked, I couldn't believe it. The exact ones my wife likes—all growing together in the same spot! As if someone planted it there just for us and our special day!"

"They're yours," answered Sophie delightedly.

The joy this brought to Mr. Stanley's face made our heroine's heart leap. But she still wasn't finished. She got up and went over to a drawer, where she drew out a bright blue bow to tie them with. The strange thing, reader, was that it was exactly the bow Mr. Stanley had imagined—right down to the smallest detail. His expression turned from joy to the same astonishment Julie had felt that morning. How? How could Sophie have possibly known?

"What's wrong?" Sophie asked, pausing. "You don't like it?"

"No, no! That's not it. It's just—"

He took the bow and examined it. How very odd! Even the little frills on the side—precisely the same! Sophie tilted her head, confused.

"I don't know, Sophie," he answered, starting to chuckle. "Sometimes . . . I think you can read minds!"

Our heroine froze and turned bright red. Her mother froze too. It wasn't the first time someone had made that remark about her daughter. Her mother was curious to see how she'd respond. But Sophie just stood there perfectly still.

"Ah, hah!" she then laughed awkwardly. What else could she do? They were clearly onto her. "Oh, hah! Oh, Mr. Stanley! Please! Mind reading? Everyone knows that's impossible. How silly!" She froze again, waiting to see how they'd react.

What a strange, strange girl Sophie was, Mr. Stanley thought. He adored her, but sometimes she was just so odd! On the other hand, he had indeed made a joke. Maybe he was just really funny? Yes, that must have been it! Upon realizing this, he started to laugh along with her.

"Ah, hah! Ah, hah! Hah, hah, hah! You're right. How silly, indeed!"

Julie joined in. By the end, they'd all nearly giggled themselves to the floor.

"Right," he finally said, wiping the tears from his eyes. "Anyways, I'm off! Thanks again, Sophie! You're the best! Julie, it was a pleasure seeing you, as always!"

"You won't stay for breakfast?" she asked.

"We're having pancakes!" exclaimed Sophie. "You'll love them. They're perfect." She slapped her hands on the table. "PERFECT!"

"I'm sure they are!" he replied, standing up and petting her on the head. "But, alas, I must be getting home. We have a big afternoon to prepare for! Please, give my regards to John. Bye everyone! Cheerio!"

Sophie ran up and hugged her dear mailman tightly. Then he left out the back door to collect the flowers.

"He's so wonderful, isn't he?" remarked Sophie, looking down at the poem. "He loves her very much . . ."

"Yes, he certainly does," sighed Julie.

Chapter 16

The Man from the Sea

Sophie sometimes wondered why she had her powers. Was she born with them? Did she acquire them somehow? Why her? Maybe it would remain a mystery forever. She wondered it again that morning as she continued helping her mother set the table. Fortunately, a clue presented itself that would get her one step closer to discovering the answer.

"Have I ever told you, Sophie," her mother suddenly remarked, "about how Mr. Stanley and I were once engaged to be married?"

Sophie dropped the dishes she was carrying—making a large clank on the table—and gasped in amazement.

"No! You never told me **THAT!**"

"Well . . . 'tis true . . ."

Our heroine dragged a chair into the kitchen and placed it in front of her mother. She plopped down in it and gazed up with a big smile on her face, like a student sitting at a desk, eager to receive the day's lesson.

"I'm guessing you want to hear about it," said Julie.

Sophie didn't even have to answer.

"Very well then," her mother sighed. "If you insist." And she told her the story. "Where shall I start?" She slowly paced back and forth, blushing. "Well, I was just a little older than you are when it happened. I was living at home with my mother and father. Charles was the boy next door. We were very close friends. We played together . . . studied together . . . helped on each other's farms. He was terribly handsome! And I knew he liked me . . ."

"Go on . . ." urged Sophie, very interested.

"Well, one afternoon, we went for a walk in a little wood. I remember it like it was yesterday. The sun was out. There were bright flowers everywhere! We found a little field full of bunnies and started feeding them. Sud-

denly, he got down on one knee. He said, 'Dearest Julie, you are the fairest creature in all the land! And have the purest heart! I should very much like you to be my wife. I love you—and promise to love you forever!'"

"Really!?" exclaimed Sophie. Her spectacles nearly flung off. She had to push them back into place. "And what did you say?"

"Well, I didn't know what to say. So . . . I said yes!"

Sophie laughed and laughed—nearly falling out of her chair.

"I know!" giggled Julie along with her. "Believe me, I was as shocked as you are. But why wouldn't I say yes? It made perfect sense! He was a wonderful boy—kind, polite . . ."

"Handsome . . ." teased Sophie.

"Our families were thrilled. We both knew they'd been planning it. But . . . I started feeling nervous. Something just wasn't right."

"You weren't in love with him."

"No . . . I'm afraid I wasn't. But how could I tell him? He was so sweet. Oh, you should have seen him."

Our heroine kept listening eagerly.

"So, what did you do?"

"Well, I don't think I realized it at the time. Or at least not right away. It was all so confusing. I was only thirteen. Nothing like this had ever happened to me before! One day I saw him coming over with his family to make wedding plans. Everyone was excited. My sisters had designed the dress, shoes—everything! We just needed to set the date and talk about living arrangements. Was I going to move in with them? Were we going to build our own house? Did I even feel ready to leave yet? I was so young! I was happy where I was. I didn't want things to change. It was all happening so fast! Well, I began to feel terribly frightened by it all. So, just as I heard them knocking on the door, I jumped out the window and ran away!"

Sophie was really enjoying this story. Her mother was so embarrassed. She'd never seen her so red before.

"How ridiculous! Wherever did you run off to?" she asked, trying not to laugh too much.

"Nowhere! I just ran! I didn't know what else to do. I ran and ran until I got to the sea. I cried. I prayed. I laughed—because of how silly it all was! What was I doing? Charles was such a sweet young man. What was wrong with me? I stood there gazing out at the ocean. The sun was setting. I cried out to God and begged he'd send a ship to come take me away—or to give me some kind of sign about what I should do. If marrying Charles was what God wanted, I would. I just needed to know first, that's all! And that's when I saw it . . ."

"Oh! OH! Father's ship!" Sophie shouted, slamming her fists on her thighs. She recognized this story now.

"Yes!"

She knew her parents met near the sea that way. She had heard it many times. But she never knew the reason her mother had been there in the first place.

"How romantic!" Sophie sighed.

"I suppose," chuckled Julie. "But I promise you, it wasn't very exciting at the time! No, it wasn't a ship. It was a shipwreck. Someone had crashed there! I still remember it. Just as I finished praying, I saw it scattered across the rocks. The wind suddenly picked up. A great wave came and washed it to shore. A man tumbled out. He fell into the water. I had to dive under to save him. And, well, you know the rest. I dragged him ashore and revived him . . ."

"So, you kissed him?" Sophie teased.

"Heavens, no!" answered Julie. "What do you take me for? I had no choice! He wasn't breathing. I had to resuscitate him." Sophie felt like teasing her mother some more, but let it go. "When he came to, he couldn't walk. He had no memory of what had happened or even who he was. I asked him to wait while I went to find help, but he begged

me not to tell anyone. He looked like he was in some kind of trouble.”

“What kind of trouble?” Sophie asked.

“I didn’t know. But it looked serious. Oh, he was so handsome! And such power in his voice. How could I resist? I obeyed his every word. Instead of telling anyone, I dragged him to a nearby cave on the beach and stayed until nightfall, nursing his wounds. I visited every evening in secret—sneaking him meals, reading him stories, teaching him all about God and the Book. He taught me about the world beyond the sea, science and strange new music. We fell in love that summer. By the end, he was fully healed and had rebuilt his ship to leave. But we couldn’t part! I brought him back to our village, introduced him, and taught him our ways here. Charles saw right away how I felt. He understood why I’d been acting so silly all summer. He forgave me and bestowed his blessing on us. Soon after that, your father and I were married.”

Sophie loved hearing the tale of her parents meeting. It had always been her favorite. But now that she was getting older and closer to that age herself, it sometimes made her feel worried. Especially the part about marriage, for one day she would be married, too. What if the man she married wanted her to leave her house? What if he lived on the other side of the village? What if it happened early like it did for her mother? Sophie was only ten. That was just a few years away! And, most worrying of all, what if she married someone who discovered her powers and didn’t like them? Maybe they would think she was some kind of— Well, she didn’t like to think about it.

“Mother,” Sophie asked then, solemnly. “Where did Father come from?”

She already knew what her mother was going to say, but couldn’t help asking.

"Well, that's the great mystery," Julie sighed. "No one knows . . ."

Sophie sighed too.

But then our heroine suddenly got an idea. Maybe she inherited her powers from her father! Yes—he was very strange, after all. Come to think of it, some of the strange things that happened around her sometimes seemed to happen around him. Or did they? It was hard to tell. Maybe he was good at hiding them too. He was also the only one in the village her powers never seemed to work on. If only she could find out where he came from, then maybe she could discover the answer. Her mother noticed how worried she was and tried to cheer her up.

"But we can guess where he's from . . ." she said.

"Hmm?"

Sophie looked up curiously.

"I think your father was a pirate!" said Julie. She drew up her mixing spoon like a sword. "Maybe he was in a great battle with a monster—a kraken!—and was flung overboard! Pow, like that!" More batter flew through the air. Samson was very happy. "He hit his head and forgot!"

Sophie liked this game. But what an awful suggestion! A pirate?

"No!" she answered, defending his honor. Sophie loathed pirates. Sometimes, she saw them around the village border. They were dirty, smelly and rude. "No, if that were true, he'd have bad teeth!"

"Well, what do you think, then?" Julie asked, challenging her.

Sophie thought about it.

"I think . . . I think he might have been a knight," she said, grabbing the roller. Now, she had a sword too. "Or maybe a musketeer. He was in the middle of rescuing a princess, but had a spell cast on him by the evil sorcerer, Kalthazar." Our heroine was a very talented actress: "'On guard, yee fool' said he. 'I should have known t'was you.

You are the man who killed my brother! And now, I am the man who is going to kill you!”

Julie was quite the actress also. They often starred together in the plays Sophie wrote for the village festival. “So, you think! But you are deceived! I am not Kalthazar, but his twin sister. And my power is even greater. Hazzza!”

Sophie and her mother chased each other around, giggling, making swishing sounds and an even greater mess of the kitchen. Neither of them noticed that Sophie’s father had been standing in the doorway watching the whole time. When they finally did, they both froze and turned bright red.

Sophie’s father was a tall and powerful looking man. He had broad shoulders and a perfectly straight posture, like an army commander. His eyes were deep blue, like Sophie’s, and his gaze was piercing. But the expression on his face was soft and gentle. Even gentler, was his voice.

“Good morning,” he said plainly.

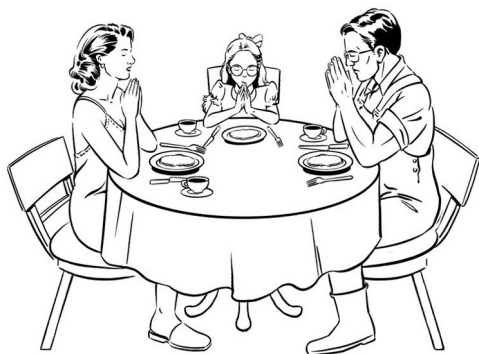
Was he upset? Was he angry? Did he even notice the mess they’d made? With him, it was so hard to tell. He always looked so calm and steady. Sophie curtsied and greeted him.

“Good morning, Father.”

She bowed her head extra low and for a much longer time than usual. Then her father started to smile. The man didn’t smile much, reader, but when he did, it was a grand, kingly smile. But he couldn’t hold back any longer—and broke into laughter. What a mess they’d made, indeed! Sophie laughed too and charged into his arms. He picked her up and hugged her tightly.

Chapter 17

The Escape Plan



It was the custom of the People of the Book to hold hands and pray before meals, thanking the Creator for their food, health and friends. “O Heavenly King,” said her father in his deep, gentle voice. “Lord of the universe, we thank You humbly for all your blessings. We love You and pray that this food may sustain us in our pursuit of wisdom, courage and temperance as we strive to do Your divine will. In the name of the holy and sacred One, we pray. Amen.”

“Amen,” responded Sophie and Julie together. Then they picked up their forks and started eating.

“Well,” said her father. “This is quite the breakfast. Thank you as well, my dear, for preparing it.”

Even after many years of marriage, Julie couldn’t help gazing and blushing when her husband spoke to her—like no time at all had passed since the day she’d first met and fell in love with him. Sophie noticed this and liked it.

“And you,” he continued, turning his attention to our heroine. “Are you eating breakfast or conducting one of your experiments?”

“Both!” she replied. Sophie had it all set up perfectly:

whipped cream . . . maple syrup . . . cinnamon . . . and every kind of berry . . . all in separate miniature goblets. "One day, I will make the perfect combination."

"That's my little scientist. Speaking of perfection, I heard you got a perfect score on one of Mr. Knox's surprise math tests the other day."

"Mmmhmm," agreed Sophie with her mouth full.

"He told me all about it. Quite an amazing achievement. Especially considering you didn't show any of your work . . ."

Sophie froze and slowly gulped.

"Yeah, I guess," she chuckled. "Must have got lucky . . ."

"Indeed."

Her father was always so calm and soft-spoken. Throughout Sophie's whole life, she had never once heard him raise his voice or even get frustrated. He took a sip of his coffee. Sophie used it as an opportunity to change the subject.

"Did you know," she quickly blurted out, "that Mr. Stanley and Mother almost got married?"

Her parents both looked at each other amused.

"I did," he replied.

Sophie started getting excited.

"Can you imagine what would have happened if they had? She wouldn't have felt nervous and run to the beach like that! She would never have seen you! You would have drowned! None of it would have happened! I wouldn't even have been born!"

"Yeah, it's quite something," he remarked.

"It's more than just something!"

"It was a miracle," said Julie.

"Perhaps."

Her father started eating his pancakes. He had them plain, with nothing on the side. His coffee was plain. Even the way he sat and dressed was plain. A red checkered

shirt and blue overalls? Less like a farmer, and more like someone trying to look like a farmer! Sophie couldn't tell what it was, but there was something very suspicious about him. He was just too normal!

"Pass the salt please," he asked.

Sophie wondered if he really had forgotten who he was. Maybe he was pretending. But why?

"Sure, John," answered Julie, handing it to him.

And that name, reader! John? He did NOT look like a "John"!

"Thank you," he answered. "Pass the pepper, please," he said next, looking at Sophie this time. He smiled.

"Who puts pepper on pancakes?" she asked.

"Well, there is a first time for everything," he said adventurously. "Perhaps it's time I try something new. Don't you think?"

She slid it to him suspiciously. Maybe he was an alien from another world! His ship had crash-landed. Now, he was trying to blend in with the humans. A ridiculous idea, of course. But if you had met Sophie's father, reader, it would have certainly seemed more likely than the story he usually suggested.

"I'm probably just an ordinary man who got caught in a storm while fishing or something."

He'd say it as casually as if he were commenting on the weather. But Sophie never bought it.

"Father, can't you remember anything?" said Sophie. "Even something small? You know, about who you were before you arrived. Your mother? Your old home? Not even your favorite color?"

He stopped and thought about it very, very hard.

"Hmm . . . no. I can't. Sorry."

"What about a crest?"

"A crest?"

"Well," said Sophie, turning red. "I was suggesting to

Mother that . . . maybe . . . you were once a knight . . . or something.”

Her father laughed.

“Good one . . .”

But his laughter only made Sophie more suspicious.

“Well, you could be!”

“Like I’ve always said, I was probably just a fisherman. One day, I got too much sun and fainted. The ocean carried me away.”

“Oh, please!” said Sophie, much to his amusement. “Do fisherman know how to use swords?”

Julie loved watching their debates.

“There are some pretty aggressive fish out there, Sophie . . .” he replied. “A little sword training would be wise of a fisherman to undertake.”

“So, you WERE trained with a sword then?”

“I never said that.”

“And are there any fish as aggressive as the Dragon King?”

“Possibly.”

Sophie’s father joined the People of the Book precisely around the time the Dragon King had risen to power. When the Dragon King discovered their village, he came to destroy it and take girls, like young Julie, as captives. But her father stood up to them. It was a fight that the People of the Book still whispered about to that day. The mysterious man from the sea who saved them! It was because of him they now lived in relative peace. Instead of killing the evil king—something forbidden by the religion of the People of the Book—he struck a deal. The village would make food for his army and the king would leave them alone.

“Doesn’t sound like the feat of an ordinary fisherman to me!” said Sophie after reminding him. She crossed her arms triumphantly and smiled. For once, she seemed to have stumped her father. But her triumph was short-lived.

"Must have got lucky," he answered—in the same tone she had used about her math test. Then, he winked at her. Our heroine froze and gulped. She didn't dare pursue the matter any further. She averted her eyes and went back to eating her breakfast.

"In other news," he continued, changing the subject. "I've nearly finished drawing up the plans for the ship." He made some space on the table and took out a blueprint. "If everything goes well, I'll have it built by this fall. We'll have enough food to give the Dragon King over the summer, as well as enough for the journey."

"Exquisite!" said Julie. "Finally, we'll be free! And you're sure there will be enough room for everyone? The whole village?"

"Yes. I'll be meeting Jean-Pierre this afternoon to show him. It will hold everyone. I'm certain."

"And you don't think the Dragon King suspects anything?"

"No, I don't think so. Everything's been normal. As long as everyone just keeps doing what we've always done, and nothing unexpected happens this summer, everything should go exactly as planned."

Sophie wasn't very interested in talking about the voyage. She loved her home and didn't want to leave. Why couldn't the Dragon King just leave them alone? They didn't bother him. Sometimes she felt like going up there and speaking with him herself. Surely, if it was just explained to him, and she showed him they meant him no harm, he would understand. But no one was allowed.

"Sophie," said her mother. "You haven't even touched your strawberries yet. Is something wrong?"

"No . . ." she sighed disappointedly. But her mother didn't believe her.

"I know. How about we take the long way home tonight?"

Sophie's eyes lit up. It was one of her favorite things in

the whole world to do! But she could hardly remember the last time they'd gone together.

"I don't know . . ." said her father, sounding worried. "I'm not sure that's a good idea."

"Of course it is!" cried Sophie. "It's a marvelous idea! Come on! Can we please take the long way home tonight?" she begged. "Please! Please! Can we?"

"It's a pretty long walk," said her father. "Maybe you and I could go? We can let your mother rest."

"No! All three of us! Like we used to! Come on! Please?"

"I'm alright," said Julie softly.

"You're sure? You have the energy for it?"

"Yes," she answered. "I want to. I'll be fine . . ."

"You see?" said Sophie, slapping her hand on the table. "She'll be fine! What else more is there to discuss? Come on!"

"Alright . . ." her father relented. "Okay. Let's do it."

Chapter 18

Getting Ready for Church

After breakfast, Sophie brushed her teeth, had a nice long bath and attempted some fancy stretches in the sunlight. Then she went into her closet to get dressed. Sophie had a much bigger closet than most girls. Ever since she started sewing, it needed to be.

"What is it?" she remembered her father asking her. She was even littler back then.

"I can't . . ." *sniffle, sniffle*, "fit . . ." *sniffle, sniffle*, "anymo' of my cos-tooms . . ."

"Is that so?"

Without warning, he opened the closet door and kicked the whole back wall down!

"Eek!"

"There, that's better. Isn't it?"

Behind the wall was their den.

"Yes, I think this will do quite nicely," he said, looking around." It's all yours now. Make as many costumes as you'd like."

He even blocked off the other doorways too, so the only entrance would be her bedroom. It wasn't long before it was completely filled up again.

Nowadays, going into her closet felt more like wandering backstage at a circus. There were hanging linens, spools of string, a wall of strange hats, funny masks and old trunks full of props. In the middle, there was a large spinning wheel and two sewing tables, each with a great jar of candy on it. One for her and one for her mother. But the best part were all the rows of dresses she could choose from.

"Hmm . . ." she sighed as she skipped through that morning. "I wonder what I should wear to church today . . ."

Whenever Sophie got dressed, her goal was always to try and look on the outside the way she was on the inside—using people’s reactions as a way of gauging whether she got it right. If someone told her she looked “pretty” or “nice,” she took it as a sign that she’d chosen wrongly. “Oh, Sophie! That’s so YOU!” or “Only YOU would wear it that way!” Now this is what our heroine liked to hear!

How then did she dress, you ask? Well, it was really quite simple. She was warm and soft-hearted. Therefore, the materials and colors she chose were warm and soft-looking. She was neat and clean. Therefore, her dresses were always spotless and constant, with no loose threads. Sophie also loved to stop and chat with people. So, she always chose accessories that made her look extra friendly and approachable, like a basket under her arm full of goodies. She wore no watch and carried no purse, for she never wanted to appear busy or short on time. If there was to be any message in appearance, she wanted it to be “Hello! Come and talk to me. I have all the time in the world!” And it worked very well. Wherever she went, people were always approaching her.

But Sophie was also a very odd girl—and she knew it. So, she always tended to sew or wear things a tad unevenly or inexplicably. Many of her pockets, for instance, were crooked. Buttons and zippers were sewn in silly places. Places which had no function whatsoever. It wasn’t because she liked the way it looked. Rather, she viewed it more like a common courtesy. People who talked to her were bound to find out she was a little weird sooner or later. Dressing that way helped save them the time and trouble. And this worked very well too! Sophie looked exactly like the kind of girl who would say something odd. Many were shocked when they talked to her. But because of the way she dressed, no one was ever surprised.

All of this led, of course, to the common view that So-

phie Tousaint didn't care about the way she looked—and that she just threw things on at random. But nothing could have been further from the truth. To the contrary, reader, no little girl in the village spent more time designing and planning her outfits. Every stroke of every needle she sewed, especially the little imperfections, was scrupulously and painstakingly planned, sometimes months in advance.

After she was done getting dressed that morning, she did her chores—sweeping, dusting, folding clothes and brushing Samson's snowy white fur. Next, she did her outdoor chores—watering plants, trimming vines and feeding the farm animals.

Their little house was light brown with bright blue trimmings and a brick chimney. All of the windowsills had pink flowers beneath them. There were bird feeders and bird baths wherever they could fit them in the yard. Samson liked to sit outside in the grass and plot war against them. "Be afraid!" he'd roar. "Meow! Be afraid! Samson is nigh! Dreadful as the storm and lightning! Stronger than the foundations of the earth!" But at the end of the day, it was always too much work for him. He wasn't nearly as dangerous as he pretended to be and spent most hours sprawled out on the porch, fast asleep. Birds and bunnies could hop right up to him and eat the crumbs of his breakfast off his whiskers. He had a hard-enough time lifting his arms, let alone hurting anything.

The farm was about as big as a schoolyard. A white picket fence encircled it. As Sophie worked, she hummed and sang little songs, saying hello to all the animals.

But there was one chore that our heroine dreaded every morning. So much so, that she often went to great lengths to avoid it. After putting it off as long as she could that morning, Sophie went into the barn to feed the pigs. Suddenly, a funny-looking man appeared from the pen.

He was giant, dark-skinned and had a great big bushy beard, crawling on all fours like he was one of the pigs.

“Snort, snort, snort! Squee! Squee!” he bellowed.
“Snort, snort, snort! SQUEE!”

Sophie shrieked.

Chapter 19

The Stranger in the Manger



Of all our heroine's powers, this one was by far the strangest. It happened late at night when she fell into her deepest sleeps. For the longest time, she thought they were just funny dreams. Until one day something extraordinary happened. Upon awaking, she heard some snoring next to her. Slowly, she rolled over and peeked over the side of her bed. The stranger she had seen in her dreams that night had followed her home!

She reacted exactly the way you would, reader. As loud as she could, she shrieked. The stranger woke up and started shrieking too. So did Samson, who nearly jumped up onto the chandeliers. But the funniest reaction of all came from Sophie's father who, upon hearing them, casually strolled in holding his plain cup of coffee. Far from panicking, he just stood there and said, "Misery acquaints a man with strange bedfellows." Then, he took a sip, turned around and calmly walked away like nothing had happened.

Shortly after, the sharp-featured gentleman discovered our heroine's barn. Finding it to his liking, he decided to move in. Sophie's father warmly welcomed him there, telling Sophie it would be her job to take care of him.

From that day onward, her morning chores would never be the same again.

“Ho! Ho! Ho!” laughed the stranger heartily. “Good day, good Mistress Sophie!”

He stood up tall and smiled.

“Good morning, Motumbo . . .” our heroine squeaked.

The giant man stepped forward, but then suddenly started losing his balance.

“Wo!” he cried, wobbling. “Wo! WoOoOo!”

He began falling backwards. Our heroine had to run to save him.

“Oh, Motumbo! Be careful!” she shrieked.

“WoOoOo! Ho! Ho! Ho!”

She got there just in time—right before he fell on a pitchfork! With all her might, she shoved him in the opposite direction. But that only ended up making things worse.

“WoOoOo!” he kept wailing again, this time falling sideways. “WoOoOo!” Sophie had to run and push him again . . . and again! Back and forth they went, turning the barn into an even greater mess! If she hadn’t grabbed onto his beard, he would have tumbled right into the trough.

“Hold . . . on . . . Motumbo!” she cried. “I . . . got . . . you!”

It was working! He was almost standing upright. But then the unthinkable happened. He teetered and fell straight towards her!

“UH OH!” he bellowed.

“Motumbo!” she shrieked. “MOTUMBOOO!”

She tried to get out of the way, but it was too late. He tumbled right on top of her.

“Oof!”

Fortunately, the hay broke their fall and neither of them got hurt. They stood up and brushed off the straw.

“Goodness!” sighed Sophie. “What a fright!”

It was a power our heroine would never get used to

because of how much chaos it introduced into her life. Motumbo was so silly! So different! So wild! Sophie used to enjoy doing her morning chores, but now they always felt like a nightmare.

“WwWwoof!” the man started growling next. “WwWwoof!”

He lowered his head and began kicking up hay like a bull.

“Eek!”

Then he started chasing her.

“Snort, snort! WwWwa! Snort, snort, snort! WwWwa! WwWwa!”

“Eek! Eek!”

The only good thing about this chaos was that it made our heroine much more patient than she would otherwise have been. As frustrating as these trips to the barn could be, they were perfect practice for all her adventures. Believe me when I say, reader, that patience more than anything is something our heroine will need!

Speaking of which, let us see if she is finally ready to begin those adventures. We’ve awoken our heroine. You’ve gotten to know her. You’ve seen her powers and how she can control them. But can she control herself? Can she remain calm and steady, as she’ll need to be? Can she listen, even when it’s hard? There is only one way to find out. Let us frustrate her even more this morning, reader! We’ll put our heroine’s patience to the test!

Suddenly, Motumbo started chasing her even faster! He threw hay up into the air! He beat his chest like an ape! He made sillier and sillier sounds!

“Whoop, whoop, whoop, WHOOP, WHOOP! Whoop, whoop, whoop, WHOOP, WHOOP!”

He tickled her heels as she ran! He poked her sides! He bent his face into funny, but frightening shapes! How red Sophie turned! How she shrieked! Her little heart beat faster and faster!

“Whoop, whoop, whoop, WHOOP, WHOOP! Hee, haw! Hee, haw! Whoop, whoop, whoop! Snort, snort!”

“EeEeEek!”

The barn got even messier. Sophie’s shoes were ruined! Her dress got a big, ugly tear in it! Soon, the poor girl could run no more. Motumbo had her cornered. There was nowhere else to go.

“WwWwoof! WwWwoof! WwWwWwWwWwoof!”

Finally, she lost her temper and wailed at the top of her lungs. “That’s it . . . STOP THIS INSTANT, SIR!”

Immediately, Motumbo halted. He scrambled backward to the middle of the room like an excited puppy and sat down nicely.

“Heavens to Betsy! Aren’t you frisky today!” Sophie exclaimed. Then she felt tears build up. She couldn’t hold back any longer and started crying.

This was all it took, reader, to bring our poor heroine to her knees. Already, she wanted to give up. Looking at the door, she felt tempted to storm out—the same way she’d done so many other times. But on this morning, something was different. After all that running away, she was finally beginning to realize that running wasn’t going to solve her problem. Sophie had only one choice. She had to get back up on her feet and try reasoning with him. But this only proved to be even more frustrating.

Slowly, Motumbo started shuffling back towards the sobbing girl. He patted her gently on the head and apologized.

“Aww, Motumbo sorry for frightening good Mistress Sophie. Motumbo not mean to. Motumbo just playing, that’s all.”

Then he gave her a great big, long, tight hug—and kissed her little hand.

“Eek!” she screeched, jumping up. His beard was so tickly!

“Motumbo won’t do it again,” he answered. “Mo-

tumbo promise! Motumbo LOVE Mistress Sophie. Motumbo love SO MUCH.”

Our heroine took a deep breath, just like her father had taught her. She sighed and did her best to remain calm.

“Oh, Motumbo!” she began. “I just can’t take this anymore! You . . . your behavior . . . calling me . . . calling me . . .” Sophie could hardly say the word, it was so upsetting. “Mistress . . .” She cringed and squirmed. “Won’t you stop all this silliness and come inside already? You’re a man, not an animal. I’m not your master. I’m just a girl! Please, please . . .” she begged, seizing his hands. They were so big. It felt like holding two bunches of bananas. “Please, come inside. We can build you a proper house. Or you can live with us! There is so much I could teach you.”

Motumbo listened very politely and sensitively as she spoke. His eyes were so full of affection, like he’d do anything for her. She began to think that maybe she’d finally gotten through to him. But that hope was shattered the moment she mentioned a house. He let go of her hands and burst into laughter.

“Ho! Ho! Ho! HO! HO! HO!” he chuckled. “Motumbo? Live in a house? But why would Motumbo do that? House too small for Motumbo!” He beat his chest again. “Besides, Motumbo love his barn. Barn Motumbo’s favorite place in WHOLE WORLD! Ho! Ho! Ho!”

“But . . . why?” our heroine moaned in pain. It felt like a knife was being plunged into her heart—and then twisted. Nothing frustrated our heroine more than absurdity and obscenity. “WHY!?” She seized him by the hand again, this time squeezing very hard. Now, she looked like the crazy one. “Look around! It’s a barn! A BARN! It’s cold . . . and FILTHY in here! Are you mad? What’s wrong with you? Don’t you want a bed to sleep in!? A nice, cozy blanket!?”

"Hmm . . ." thought Motumbo, scratching his chin. Then he burst out laughing again. "No! Motumbo don't! Ho! Ho! Ho! Motumbo already have bed, see? Behold, Motumbo's bed of straw! And as for blanket—who needs blanket who has friends?" He pointed to the wooly sheep—and big fat muddy pig he liked to cuddle with.

"Squee!" it seemed to croak in agreement. Motumbo started squealing again too. "Squee! Snort, snort, snort. Squee! WeEeEe!"

There was that feeling again, reader—like a second knife. Only this time, in her stomach! "Oh!" she gagged. "How . . . how . . . how revolting!" Every heroine has a weakness, reader. Hers was mud. It took every ounce of her strength just to stop herself from fainting. "But there must be SOMETHING we can do, Motumbo!" she begged. "Surely, we could at least make a few changes around here!"

Motumbo looked at her with a very doubtful expression on his face, but decided to hear her out. As she paced around the room pitching him some ideas, he followed along and listened.

"Why—how about some candles, Motumbo? Brighten up the place a bit! How does that sound?"

"Hmm. No, thank you!" he answered politely. "Motumbo afraid of fire . . ."

"Oh . . . I see," said Sophie. "Well, what about a bookshelf, then? Look! Here's a nice spot! What do you say?"

But he just kept shaking his head.

"No—reading make Motumbo sleepy."

He stretched and yawned just thinking about it.

"O-kay . . ." she answered. "How about a grandfather clock? My father builds them, you know. He could make one just for you! We could put it in the corner here."

"Oh, no! No!" he pleaded. "Clocks make Motumbo late!"

“W-w-well . . .” Sophie stuttered. “Would you at least consider wearing some clothes?”

Sophie looked down and gulped. All Motumbo wore was a loincloth—one which was far too small.

“Nah!” he grunted, dismissively. “Too constricting. Motumbo prefer to be freeee!”

He started swaying back and forth, dancing again.

“Eek!”

Quickly, Sophie covered her eyes.

“Well, how about a proper education, then!” she shouted next.

Surely, Motumbo would want that. But once again, she was surprised.

“Edu-cation?” he asked. “What is edu-cation?”

Sophie sighed.

“You know—learning things!”

“Like what?”

“Things you might be curious about. I’m terribly curious about a lot of things, Motumbo! Aren’t you?”

Motumbo thought about it and shrugged.

“No, not really. Motumbo know how to love! Motumbo know how to serve! Motumbo know way to church! If edu-cation not teach Motumbo how do these things bett-ah, then Motumbo not interested.”

When all her heroic efforts failed, Sophie then asked Motumbo to close his eyes and describe what he thought would be the perfect home. She ran to a cupboard where there were pencils and paper. She would draw it! Then, her father and her would build it for him! Motumbo paced back and forth and gave a very detailed account—everything from the way the walls would be, to the kinds of toys he liked and the perfect bed. Sophie started getting very, very excited! “MmmHmm!” she’d say with a great big smile, “MmmHmm! What else!?” But when she was finished and looked down at the page, she realized that she had drawn a giant hamster cage. Motumbo laughed heartily and approved. So did the muddy pig. By the end,

our heroine was completely exhausted and had run out of all the patience she had left. She gave up and collapsed onto her knees before him.

"Oh, Motumbo . . ." she sighed, seizing him by his enormous hands again. "Motumbo! Whatever am I going to do with you? "What is it that I can do? Please just tell me. I beg you!"

This time, Motumbo was the one who sighed.

"Hmm . . . you really want to know?" he asked with a great big smile spreading across his face.

"Yes. Yes!" she pleaded.

"Okay. Then, Motumbo tell you." He went down on one knee and got as close to her as he could. "All Motumbo want from good Mistress Sophie is to let Motumbo be Motumbo—like good Sophie's fatha' does. Let Motumbo love. Let Motumbo serve. Let Motumbo come to church. Let Motumbo . . . be free."

Just then, our heroine began to realize how she must have been making Motumbo feel all that time. She was always marching in there with the intention of changing him, avoiding him or wishing he were different. Did she ever once stop and think about whether Motumbo was just fine the way he was? Maybe she was the one who needed to change a little.

Sophie always lost her patience with Motumbo because she made the mistake of thinking she could control him—like she could control so many other things. But before she started her adventure, she had to learn that some things would always be out of her control. When she finally realized the truth that morning, all that worry and frustration suddenly melted away.

"Okay . . . okay . . ." she said sniffing and holding back her tears. "I'll try . . ." She gave her friend a great big hug. "I'm sorry, Motumbo! Can you ever forgive me?"

Motumbo nodded and hugged her back.

They got along much better after that. Sophie didn't

mind being chased as much. She even found it fun sometimes. And if she ever didn't want him to chase her, all she had to do was calmly raise her hand as he approached. Motumbo would stop dead in his tracks and behave like a perfect gentleman. She taught him how to tap dance, have tea parties and even how to play the banjo. Motumbo taught Sophie fun new games. I wouldn't say these mornings became any less chaotic, reader—but they were certainly more fun. Instead of her morning chores ending in shrieking and crying, they concluded with hoedowns, rodeos and gales upon gales of laughter.

When our heroine came out of the barn that day, the sun was extra bright. The air smelled fresh. With just one conversation, her patience had tripled. She felt like she could get along with just about anyone now.

Around the corner, she found her father. He was sitting on the fence, tinkering with one of his tools.

"Oh," he muttered, as if not expecting her. "So, how did it go this time?"

He was pleasantly surprised by Sophie's answer.

"You know," she said, "I really like that Motumbo."

"Is that so?"

"MmmHm! I think he's right where he should be."

"Good," he nodded approvingly.

She turned around and he watched her head back to the house whistling and humming.

"... That's good."

Chapter 20

Queer Happenings

Sometimes being magical was fun. You could sneak extra cookies. You could know when a guest was coming. You could do nice things for your friends. Other times, being magical was frustrating. You could wander far beyond what people called “boundaries” and meet the funniest sorts of folks. Though you never knew who might follow you home! However, being magical could also be a little scary. Queer things would happen to you. Spooky things! Sometimes all day long.

Once, Sophie had been alone in her room sewing a new dress. Suddenly, all the buttons and beads in her kit started floating around her! On another occasion, she was planning a scene in one of her plays. She thought of the fireworks she might use. “Pow! Bam!” she had said, imagining it. All of the sudden, one of her props caught on fire. “Eek!” She nearly burned down the house! The spookiest of all was the time she wandered a little too far in one of her “dreams” and ended up getting lost. She was asleep for days and many began to worry that she might never wake up.

Because of this, our heroine often wished she didn’t have her powers. What if she accidentally hurt someone? What if she got her village in trouble one day? Sometimes she felt so worried and scared that she would be sad for hours on end. It was a good thing she had a best friend she could talk to. Someone who was just as skilled at keeping secrets.

“Narissa!” she yelled, banging on her friend’s door. Something spooky had happened again that morning, just after she’d visited Motumbo. It sent Sophie running as fast as she could to tell her about it. “Narissa! Hello!” she continued, banging some more. “Are you there? It’s important!”

“Just a minute!” a voice from the other side called back.

Their farms were right next to each other. Ever since they were little, their families had walked to church together.

Sophie tried her best to wait patiently. What was taking her so long? She put her ear to the door and listened. It sounded like Narissa was rustling through her closet.

“I’m coming! Hold on!”

Then Sophie heard some stomping. It got louder and louder—and closer! A moment later, the door swung open, nearly knocking her right off the steps. A girl with a big, bright smile and rosy cheeks emerged. She was a little taller than Sophie and had fabulous, bouncy blue hair.

“O-kay! I’m ready!” she yelled, posing in the doorway.

“Golly,” sighed Sophie regaining her balance. “That was a close one! Good morning, Narissa.”

Then the girl froze. Her eyes fell to Sophie’s dress. She just stood there, staring at it. The smile slowly started to disappear.

“Umm . . .” Sophie stammered, feeling a little nervous. “Narissa?” She glanced down at herself, wondering what the problem was. But she didn’t see anything. “Is . . . there something wrong?”

The girl groaned.

“Yes, there is,” she answered, crossing her arms. “Look! Your dress! It’s completely different from mine!



We're supposed to be matching today! Don't you remember?"

Sophie paused and thought about it. "Oh . . ." she sighed. "No, I don't think I do. Sorry!" She could be so forgetful sometimes. But then she thought a little more and—"Hey, wait a minute . . . Are you sure we agreed to—"

But thankfully, Narissa had already forgiven her.

"Yep!" she interrupted, rushing forward and covering Sophie's mouth.

"Mmm!" was all that came out.

"But don't worry! I can fix it! I just have to get changed, that's all!"

"MmMmMm!"

Then, without warning, Narissa seized Sophie by the arm and started hauling her around the corner.

"Come on! Around back! Yesterday was laundry day. My dresses are all out on the clothesline, drying."

"But . . ." whimpered Sophie, struggling free. "I need to tell you something!"

"Then you can tell me on the way. LET'S GO!"

The only problem with our heroine's best friend, reader, was how rough she could sometimes be. She was always pinching, prodding and grabbing her. When she hugged Sophie, she'd pick her right off the ground and squeeze her so tight she couldn't breathe. When she held her hand, she'd almost never let go. Sophie's favorite game was "dress-up." But with Narissa, it felt more like wrestling. During their sleepovers, she would raid Sophie's closet and handle her like a rag doll . . . bending her this way . . . contorting her that way . . . and stretching her into all kinds of uncomfortable positions. She'd pin Sophie down and tickle her until it wasn't fun anymore, break into her house at night to kidnap her for midnight swims, and chase her with a towel at the village bathhouse, whipping her like a race-

horse. Sophie loved her best friend dearly, but sometimes it could be so painful! She was no less rough with her that morning.

“Hey, quit pulling so hard, Narissa!” she squeaked. “You’re going to tug my arm off.”

“You’re walking too slow!”

“But this is as fast as I can go . . .”

“Okay,” she answered, smiling. “Then I’ll have to carry you!”

She turned to Sophie and scooped her up.

“Eek!”

“There! That’s better! Now, what was it you wanted to say?”

Sophie had learned that being in Narissa’s clutches was a little like being in quicksand. The more you struggled, the tighter she squeezed. The more you squirmed, the more her hands would look for other, ticklier places to hold onto. It was safer to just relax and let her have her way.

“Well . . .” she began, doing her best to talk. It was hard with all the bouncing and jostling. “After visiting Motumbo this morning . . . oof! . . . I went into the bathroom to fix my hair. Oof! I looked in the mirror and no one was there, but me. But after I put away my brush, I looked again—and saw someone standing behind me!”

“Wow! Really?” asked Narissa, excited.

“Yeah!”

“Cool!”

“Cool?” Sophie gasped. “How is that cool!? It scared the life out of me, Narissa! Just thinking about it gives me the creeps!”

“So, what happened? Who were they?”

“That’s the thing. I don’t know! They vanished the moment I saw them. I don’t even remember their face. Only . . . their eyes . . .”

“Maybe it was a ghost.”

"Agh! A ghost!?" Sophie squeezed up close to Narissa and trembled in her arms.

"Maybe!" her friend smiled. "After all, it wouldn't be the first time you saw one, would it?"

Sophie gulped.

"Well . . . regardless, I've come to tell you that I've made a decision, Narissa. I'm not going to use my powers anymore! Not even to help people. It's too dangerous! And frightful!"

"What!?"

Narissa plopped Sophie down next to the clothesline.

"They're not powers," said Sophie. "They're a curse! I just want to be normal. I can't always control them . . . but if I try really hard, maybe they'll just go away."

"Hey, come on. Don't say that. You're not cursed. You're just different, that's all. I like your powers!"

"But what if God doesn't want me using them? What if it makes him angry . . . or disappointed . . . or worse . . . what if it makes him . . ." Sophie gulped and started tearing up. ". . . not like me anymore . . ."

But sometimes a little of Narissa's roughness was exactly what our heroine needed. She may have been bossy to Sophie. She may have been stubborn, manipulative and nosey. She may even have been a tad abusive at times. But she was also brutally honest, impossible to deceive and fearless of all things strange. Sophie could tell her absolutely anything. Narissa wouldn't get spooked, disbelieve her, or look at her any differently after. She encouraged Sophie, loved her fiercely (perhaps a little too fiercely at times) and was always there for her. Many people in the village wondered how they could possibly be friends, given how different they were. Often, Sophie wondered it herself. But it was times like this, when our heroine was feeling blue, that she always remembered.

"What!? No way!" said Narissa. She grabbed Sophie by the shoulders and pulled her close. "God loves you, Sophie! He made you just the way you are! Don't listen to

any bad feelings like that. He has a plan for your powers, just as He has a plan for everything else. There is a reason He gave them to you. We just . . . don't know what it is yet . . . that's all."

"Really?" sighed our heroine, sniffing more. "You really think so?"

"Yeah!" Narissa let Sophie go. "So, don't give up! Okay?" She smiled and winked at her. Then she pushed Sophie's spectacles back into place and dried her tears with her cuff.

"Well," Sophie replied, feeling a little better. "Maybe . . . maybe you're right."

"Of course I am!"

"I just wish I knew what it was, that's all. If only I knew . . . then maybe it wouldn't be so scary."

"Well, maybe there's a way to find out."

"You think?"

"Maybe." Narissa shrugged.

"I hope so. I don't know how much more of this I can take. At this point, I think I'd do just about anything to find out."

And that's when Narissa suddenly got her brilliant idea.

"Hey, wait a minute. I know!" she shouted.

Sophie looked at her curiously.

"Why don't you ask Jean-Pierre today!? He knows lots about God, right?"

Jean-Pierre was the village priest. He lived in the temple at the village square.

"Oh, yeah . . ." Sophie remembered. "That's right!"

"He's who I talk to whenever I feel confused. He gives marvelous advice!"

"But . . ." stammered Sophie, "you never take his advice, Narissa . . ."

"So? It's still good advice! Well, come on. What do you say? It's a worth a try, right? We can go right now!"

But Sophie wasn't yet sure.

"Golly . . ." she sighed nervously. She never really thought about asking Jean-Pierre before. But Narissa was right. If there was anyone in the village who could help her figure that out, it was him. But did they have time that morning? She pulled out her pocket watch to check. Fortunately, Narissa snatched it out of her hand before she could see and threw it into the bushes.

"Yes, now!" she ordered. "Trust me, we can make it! I know a shortcut!"

Sophie thought and thought.

"Hmm . . . hmm . . . hmm . . ."

She was never was very good at making decisions.

"Hey! Don't make me twist your arm!"

"Eek!"

Finally, she made up her mind.

"Okay!" our heroine cheered. "Let's do it!"

"Really?"

"Yes! I want to! Let's go!"

The two friends held hands and started jumping up and down. It was settled. They would go to the temple at the village square. The only problem was getting there.

"Okay, which way?" said Sophie pulling her.

But Narissa wouldn't budge until she did something first. She hurried over to the clothesline.

"H-hey . . . wait . . . what are you doing?"

"What does it look like? I'm getting changed."

"But . . . out here?"

"Why not? Don't worry." Narissa winked at her. "It will only take a minute." Then she started undressing.

"Eek! Are you crazy!?"

And now you see, reader, why it was so good that Narissa had a friend like Sophie too. With lightning-fast reflexes and gallant speed, our heroine dashed to the nearest bedsheet. She tore it off and used it as a wall to cover her.

“Jiminy crickets!” she yelled chasing Narissa, who kept running away. “Get back here! Someone might see you!”

Who knows what would have happened to this girl without Sophie? At the very least, I think you would agree—she wouldn’t have had nearly as much fun.

“Come on, Sophie!” she teased. “You’re going to have to be faster than that.”

“Goodness gracious!” Sophie kept exclaiming. “Heavens to Betsy! Great Scott!”

Chapter 21

Shortcut to the Village Square

Sophie liked walking along the roads to church, but Narissa preferred the bumpier, more adventurous paths.

"Where are you taking me, Narissa?" she asked. "This isn't the right way, is it?"

"Of course it is!" she answered.

"But—are you sure?"

"Hey! Do you want to find out what your powers are for, or not? Trust me! I know the way. This is a shortcut! I think . . ."

Sophie gulped.

Nibelheim was no ordinary village. It was built upon the ruins of an ancient city. There were statues, tombstones and fallen temples just about everywhere you looked. Especially in the wilder, wooded parts that were too steep and rocky to farm. Narissa was quick and nimble. She dashed through these trails with ease. But Sophie was lousy at it. She got stuck in every bush . . . "Agh!" . . . tripped over every tree root . . . "Eek!" . . . and slipped on just about every single rock . . . "Oof!" It was a good thing her friend was there to catch her, or she may have never made it out.

"Narissa! Help!"

"Gotcha!" she answered with her big smile.

Often, they found old trinkets, coins and runes in the soil. They had lots of fun collecting and deciphering the symbols on them. Many were the late nights they'd spent trying to put together the pieces of the puzzle. Who were the people who dwelt there before them? What happened to them? "Nibelheim" wasn't the name Sophie's village chose for itself. It was the name inscribed on an ancient stone tablet they discovered when they arrived on the shores. It meant "Home of the Mist." The People of the Book kept it in honor of them.

Sophie and Narissa also found crystals in the soil. The coast of the continent was rich with blues and greens. Reds were a little less common in that part of the world, except around the volcanos. Yellows seemed to appear more after thunderstorms. By the end of their little excursions, their pockets would be stuffed.



But the most exciting part was the buried treasure chests they'd find! All Sophie would have to do is close her eyes and think about them. Somehow, she'd know exactly where they were. She did the tracking and Narissa did the digging. With all the artifacts they discovered, they could have probably opened their own museum.

"O-kay," said Narissa, coming to her favorite part of the woods. There was a deep ravine called "Snake Pit." All the children were afraid of it. But not Narissa! She had climbed up a tree one day and built a rope swing over it. "Come on!" she said, holding on. "Let's GO!" With her brilliant blue hair flowing in the wind, she swung across effortlessly. Sophie gasped in astonishment as she landed

on the other side. “Hi-ya! There! You see? It’s easy!” Sophie looked doubtful. Then Narissa threw the rope back. “Okay . . . now it’s YOUR turn!”

“What! Me?” our heroine squeaked. She looked around to see if there was anyone else, but there wasn’t.

“Yes! You!”

Sophie had never dared try before. When Narissa swung over, she always took the long way around. But today there was no time.

“Hey, I thought you said you’d do anything,” Narissa teased.

“I did?” answered Sophie, trembling.

“MmmHm! So, prove it!”

Sophie hopped up onto the ledge. She felt a cold gust of wind. The sun’s bright beams nearly blinded her. It shone behind Narissa, making her blue hair glitter with gold. She looked down at the snakes and started to feel scared. But then Sophie saw the Dragon King’s mountain fortress in the distance. That black smoke rising! Those horrible, ugly ships patrolling the seas! For some reason, it made her feel braver and more determined.

“Alright,” she said. “I’ll do it.” She closed her eyes and took a very deep breath, almost like she was getting ready to dive under water. Her cheeks puffed up like a chipmunk’s. Narissa tried her best not to laugh. Then Sophie bent her little knees, gripped the rope tightly and counted down backwards from three—“Mmm! Mmm! MMM!”—before jumping. “EeEeEeEk!” she squealed all the way across. Narissa couldn’t hold back her laughter any longer. Sophie was as stiff as board, twirling around in circles. But then Narissa realized she wasn’t going to make it. She dashed towards the edge, reached out and caught our heroine by the hand just in time. “Gotcha!”

When they finally arrived at the village square, their hair and dresses were full of twigs. They took turns dusting each other off. Nibelheim was bright and colorful.

There were flowers on every windowsill, children laughing on every corner, kittens, puppies, pony rides and a band who played the most cheerful, delightful music you can imagine. The air smelled like fresh cinnamon buns and apple pie. You could hardly take a step without being offered some. But the best part, at least in our heroine's opinion, was how squeaky clean and friendly everyone was. As she skipped and hummed, she tried her best to greet each and every one of them.

"Good morning! How do you do?" she said curtsying.

"Very well, thank you," they'd reply. The women curtsied back to her. The men smiled and tipped their hats. "And you?"

"Very well! Thank you!"

Sometimes Sophie would get a little too excited and send herself spinning.

"And how do YOU do? And how do YOU do?" There were so many. She couldn't keep up. "And how do YOU and YOU and YOU do? Eek!"

"Sophie," said Narissa, holding her up. "You can't say good morning to everyone, or you're going to get dizzy and fall over again. Don't you remember what the doctor said?"

"Sorry, Narissa! But I can't help it. Everyone is so charming! Oh, look! Fresh strawberries!"

Farmers brought in their best crops on Sundays. They parked their carts in a big circle. People came and took what they pleased. Everything was free in Nibelheim. Instead of using money, people just shared. Nor were there any police or mayors. Why would there be when everyone got along? The only rule the People of the Book followed was "do what the Book says." As long as everyone did that, there was no need for any more. On Sundays, you would always hear at least one person standing up tall, passionately reading from It.

"Be kind . . . treat others fairly . . . say you're sorry if

you do something wrong . . . always forgive . . . share everything . . . do good deeds . . . shower everyone you see with affection . . .” And so on and so forth.

Sophie loved her village so much that sometimes she’d climb up onto the fountain in the middle and just sit there with a big smile on her face, watching everyone as they did these things. It was her favorite thing to do in the whole world.

But our heroine was on a mission that morning. She needed to find the village priest before church started. Quickly, she handed her basket to Narissa and ran up the stairs into the temple.

Chapter 22

A Place of Light and Song

Temples were places where the People of the Book gathered to read, pray and sing together. There were rows and rows of wooden benches to sit on, elegantly engraved stone walls and bright stained-glass windows. Further in was a staircase that led up to a kind of stage where the sacred Ceremony of Light was held.

The Ceremony of Light was the most important part of going to church. When the reading, singing and speeches were over, the priest would walk to an altar and drop a special blue and yellow crystal into a pitcher of water. The blue in it would cleanse and cool the water. The yellow would make it sparkle and shine. Then, he'd say a prayer and pour the water into a pink crystal chalice that everyone would take turns drinking from. The person who helped him hold and serve the sacred water was called "the Light Bearer." Only a little girl was allowed to do it.

When Sophie entered, she lowered her eyes, put her hands together and whispered a little prayer. That was how the People of the Book said hello to God. Then she looked up at the altar and bowed to the big, fancy golden copy of the Book, which sat upon a silver pedestal.

"Welcome, my child," said a man dressed in long white robes. He had a short grey beard and a gentle smile. His voice was soft, deep and slow—like the tone of someone reading you a pleasant bedtime story. "Please, come in!" he said, extending his even whiter staff.

"Jean-Pierre!" our heroine whispered.

Sophie bowed to the man just as low as she had to the altar. Then she took him by the hand and kissed his ring. That was where he kept that special blue and yellow crystal when it wasn't being used. It chilled and tickled her lips.

"Sorry I'm a little early!" she continued. "But I wanted to talk to you about something—if you have time."

"Certainly," he replied, putting his arm around her shoulders.

Jean-Pierre was such a kind man. The way he looked at people made them feel so special. Sophie loved the feel of his soft, warm robes. She couldn't help curling up in them as they walked.

Slowly, he led our heroine up the stairs. They made sure to bow together in perfect unison every time they passed a holy relic. There were scrolls, sculptures and the prettiest, sweetest-smelling candles all the way up. When they reached the top, they pulled up two fancy chairs and sat across from one another.

"Some tea?" he whispered.

"Oh, yes please!"

He poured her a little cup from the sacred teapot.

"Thank you!"

Then he reached into a cupboard and pulled out a small silver tin.

"Turkish delight?" he asked next, opening it. Sophie gasped. Her favorite!

"How lovely!"

He had licorice and some chocolate marshmallow squares too. They sat together nibbling, chatting about recipes and making yummy sounds for several minutes before starting. The People of the Book rarely did anything without eating or drinking first.

"So," said Jean-Pierre finally, leaning back in his chair, wiping all the powdery sugar from his beard. "What's on your mind?"

Sophie was now feeling so comfortable that she almost forgot. She had to think for a moment before remembering.

"I wanted to ask you a question. It's about God."

"Oh? Well, you've certainly come to the right place."

What is your question, my child? If I know the answer, I shall surely tell you."

Sophie tried to think of the best way of asking but couldn't make up her mind. So, instead, she just blurted it out.

"Jean-Pierre," she sighed. "How do you know what God wants you to do?"

The priest paused and began stroking his beard in deep thought. "Ah, a very good question," he said, hemming and hawing. "Hmm . . . Mmm . . . a very good question indeed." He took out his pipe and lit it, taking two or three big puffs before answering. In Sophie's experience, that was always a sign he was about to give a really good answer. She waited patiently.

"Well," he said finally. "There are lots of ways. You know, it's a little like those stories you're always writing. You're an author, aren't you? A creator . . . designer . . . You have characters who you want to do things. Well, how do they figure it out?"

What a funny question! Sophie had never really thought about her books that way before. She just wrote whatever came to mind. How did she get her characters to know what to do? Sophie thought about them and did her best to remember.

"I suppose I give them clues," she answered.

"Go on . . ." he said, taking another puff of his pipe.

"Things happening around them . . . people in their lives . . . being in the right place at the right time."

"Only around them?"

She thought some more.

"No—on the inside too."

"What do you mean?"

"I create them a certain way. If I want them to do something, I put a deep, deep desire for it in their hearts, or maybe a special talent just for that purpose. There are no coincidences. No, sir! Everything happens for a reason!

Even little things. Especially little things! These, I think, are the most common ways they learn what to do.”

“Well,” answered Jean-Pierre. “It’s the same with God.” He stood up and walked to the altar, lifting the Golden Book from the pedestal. “Here,” he said, gently placing it in her lap. Then he pulled up his chair and sat next to her. “Go on. Open it and see.”

The Book was heavy and beautifully ornamented. It took both hands to lift open the cover. The words inside were written using very rare crystal ink. The pages were special too. As she turned them, they glittered and glowed like the book was alive.

“God did the same things with the characters in His Book. The same hints . . . the same clues . . . inside and outside, as you say. Often, learning what He wanted them to do was simply a case of opening their eyes and looking for it.”

“But that was then,” answered Sophie. “This is now. I’m not a character in the Book.”

“No, that’s true. But just because a book is over, it doesn’t mean the story is. The God who provided us with this Book is the same God who exists today. He is everywhere—at all times—both inside and around us. The Book may be over,” he said, gently closing it. “But His story is still going on, even right now as we speak—in this very room. Look around. Think back and try to remember, as if you were a character in His next book. What clues might He be giving you, Sophie? What people might He have put into your life? What special desires . . . or gifts?”

“Hmm,” she thought.

I would encourage you to look back and do the same, reader. Can you find any clues?

First, Sophie thought of her prayer that morning. Then, she thought of her conversation with her mother and Mr. Stanley. Next, she thought of her mysterious father . . . and Motumbo . . . and Narissa. That feeling she

got when looking at the Dragon King's mountain! That feeling she got when watching everyone in the village square! Last, she thought about her powers. What could they be for? She looked up and out of the window and saw the mountain once again . . . the third time that day. Suddenly our heroine started feeling very, very worried.

"OoOoOo . . ." she sighed, holding her belly. "I don't feel so good . . ."

"Of course, the easiest way," added the priest next, shrugging, "is just to ask God."

"Hmm!?"

Sophie's eyes shot up at him. He said it as casually as if he were commenting on the tea he was sipping.

"Oh, yes. Why not? He is here after all. Come on, give it a try."

"Uh," muttered Sophie hesitantly. "You mean . . . right now?"

She looked back down towards the entrance way. That was odd! People should have been coming in by then. Their time was up. She could see the shapes and shadows of them through the window, but no one entered. Narissa must have been distracting them.

"Sure!" said the priest. "What better time?"

But Sophie wasn't so sure she wanted to anymore.

"OoOoOo . . ." she groaned again, holding her belly.

"I hope the Turkish delight is alright. I was told it was fresh. Are you sure you're okay? You look a little under the weather."

"No . . . it's not that," she sighed.

"Well then, come on. You do want to know, don't you? For He will only answer if you're sure. When you ask Him, you must do so with a full heart . . . an open mind . . . ready and willing to do whatever it is . . . even if it's something uncomfortable or dangerous. God speaks to the patient . . . to good listeners . . . to those who are brave enough to trust. Do you really want to know what God

wants you to do, Sophie? Do you trust Him? Are you willing to say yes?"

"Yes!" she answered, remembering. "I do! I am! I'm just . . . a little scared . . . that's all."

"It's okay to be scared," replied Jean-Pierre, taking her by the hand and leading her to the altar. He helped her to her knees and placed her hands together. "If you weren't, you wouldn't be ready. Focus now, my child. Think of the exact question you wish to ask. Try to relax, so you'll be able to hear. Sometimes, He speaks in words. Sometimes, in pictures, like a dream. Remember, He created you. He knows your every thought, feeling and deepest desire. If you reach out to Him, you must trust He will respond in a way you will understand."

Sophie felt the warm sunlight on her face. She took a deep breath and did her best to relax her whole body. "Okay," she sighed as he backed away. "Here it goes." She focused with all her heart, and all her mind, on the one she'd be addressing. "God . . . Sir . . . please tell me. What is it you want me to do? I'll do it. I'll do anything—if you tell me."

Chapter 23

Visions

She was expecting to hear a voice, but it felt more like waking from a dream. Sophie gasped, winced and jostled! When she looked around, she realized she was no longer in the temple. Instead, she was hovering high up above it. From here, she was shown a glimpse into the future.

First, she saw the Dragon King's army. It had grown even larger. They marched into every village along the coast, burned them down and loaded all the survivors onto slave ships. Sophie watched helplessly as her mother, Motumbo and Narissa were dragged away in chains. Never had she felt so heartbroken before! Her precious village square, which was once so lively and beautiful, was now a desolate wasteland.

Next, in the blink of an eye, she was transported to another place. This time, to a battlefield! The Dragon King's army had travelled over the sea. One by one, they raided and plundered the kingdoms of the world.

It was always the same strategy. First, he'd send his dragon to scorch everything. Then, he'd send his soldiers. Sometimes, the Dragon King didn't even have to attack. He'd just pay the other kings for their crowns. Or, he would pay their armies to switch sides. It wasn't long until there were no kingdoms left at all. They all belonged to him. The Dragon King sat on the throne of the whole world!

But then Sophie began to wonder. Something just



didn't seem right. Why was God showing her this? She wasn't a queen. She wasn't a soldier. What did this have to do with her question? And that's when she was given the third part of her vision.

Suddenly, the Dragon King and his armies vanished. She was transported back in time to her island, before the invasion. Now she realized that God hadn't really been showing her the future. He'd been showing her a possible future—what would happen if she didn't do the thing He wanted. What then did He want her to do? She looked around curiously for the clues . . . until she noticed where she was standing.

"OoOoh . . ." she thought, holding her belly. Suddenly, she wasn't feeling so well again. She was right at the entrance of the Dragon King's mountain fortress! The black gates started creaking open. A lantern with a sparkly white flame appeared in her hand.

"OoOoh . . . I have a bad feeling about this." She took a deep breath and gulped. Slowly, she tip-toed inside.

The corridors of the fortress were dark and eerie. Worse, they were full of traps, trip wires and armed guards. But our heroine saw the traps. She slipped past every trip wire. Calmly and patiently, she waited until exactly the right moments when the guards' backs would be turned. As quiet as a mouse, she scurried by. Even when she came to the courtyard, which was full of soldiers, she walked right across without being noticed and up the stairs.

Last was the door to the throne room. There were two guards this time. Next to them was a wall of keys. Choosing the wrong one would set off an alarm. How could she possibly get by? But our heroine solved this puzzle too. She distracted the guards, found the key and quietly snuck in.



“So that’s what my powers are for,” she realized. “I’m supposed to use them to get inside. But once I’m in, what do I do?” She took another deep breath and kept going.

The Dragon King’s throne room reminded her of the temple—only, everything was backwards. Instead of sunlight, beautiful things and comfortable places to pray, it was black, gloomy and full of torture devices. Instead of a golden book upon an altar, there was a giant golden chair next to a most unholy-looking dinner table. The only light coming in was from a small hole in the middle of the ceiling. Sophie walked directly into the beam and planted her feet there, firmly. She looked up at the Dragon King, who suddenly took notice of her.

He was the scariest man she had ever seen. His armor was thick, spikey and dyed red with blood. His helmet flared out with two bull horns coming out the sides. It was too dark to see his eyes, but she could feel them glaring



hatefully on her. Then, he stood up and slowly started walking down the stairs. Sophie felt like running away, but she didn't. Instead, she tightened her grip around the lantern and stood her ground. Little did she know, it was about to get even scarier. From

the shadows, three more villains emerged.

The first of the three was a troll named Choad. He looked like a giant toad, walking on hind legs. His mouth was enormous, with hundreds of razor-sharp teeth. He had a long tongue inside that could snap out, quickly wrap around his enemies, and pull them in. Choad was in



charge of the Dragon King's slaves. As he followed him down the stairs, he drew a whip and scowled at Sophie like he was going to lash her with it. Again, Sophie felt like running. But she still didn't move.



Next came Kanga Kang—a mutant kangaroo with attitude! He was in charge of weighing and selling all the drugs the slaves produced. He wore black sunglasses, a long gold chain and two bright red boxing gloves with barbed wire wrapped around them. The way he kept smiling down at Sophie as he walked, pounding his fists together, made her heart race even faster.

Zeetan was the last of the three. By all appearances, he seemed like an ordinary gorilla. But if you looked carefully, you could see something was very, very wrong. His eyes were crossed. His tongue was hanging from his mouth, along with heaps of drool. That meant a Klandeathuan Brainworm had gotten into his head. Sophie had read about them once. They entered through the nose or ear and lodged themselves behind their vic-



tim's eyes. From there, they could control someone like a puppet. Zeetan was the Dragon King's head interrogator and torturer. He carried a mallet and sickle. Did he want to hurt Sophie? Or did he want to slither into her brain next? She didn't know which would be worse!

Our heroine stood quivering and shivering, clinging to the lantern the same way she had the rope swing that afternoon. What was she supposed to do now? Give them the lantern? They didn't seem interested. Fight them? Sophie had never been in a fight before. She wasn't prepared for that. They closed in on her. The Dragon King drew his big sword! He raised it above his head, ready to strike! Sophie panicked. Was this it? Was this the end? She closed her eyes and braced herself for her doom!

Just then, the most surprising thing of all happened. The four villains suddenly froze and turned their attention to something else. A horn sounded in the distance! She heard footsteps hurrying behind her! She wasn't alone after all! Someone was coming to help! But who? Before it occurred to her to turn and look, he was already there, fearlessly at her side. It was a boy! And he had a

sword of his own! Drawing it, he got between the villains and Sophie. They all took a step back, feeling just as surprised as she was.



“Who was this boy?” our heroine wondered. It was too dark to see his face under his hood. She felt like she knew him from somewhere.

Then everything clouded over. Sophie started feeling sleepy and dizzy. The next thing she knew, she was back in her church again, kneeling before the altar. It took her a moment to realize what had just happened. But when she did, she spun around and called out to her priest.

“Jean-Pierre! Jean-Pierre! Guess what! You’ll never believe what—”

However, the priest was gone. She looked down the staircase. The front doors were open. Everyone was coming in. Jean-Pierre was busy greeting them.

“Oh . . .”

Then Sophie noticed the music playing. She twirled around once more and saw her father sitting at the organ. He smiled and waved. She waved back awkwardly. It made her wonder how long she must have been out for.

“Hey!” cried Narissa. She came from behind Sophie, spooking her.

“Eek!”

“What are you doing!?”

“Hmm?”

Sophie was still a little dreamy.

“Here! Put this on!” Narissa was holding a pretty, pink cloak. “It’s your turn to be the Light Bearer today, remember!?”

“It is?”

Narissa put it on her without even answering.

“You must have forgotten!”

She took her hand and hauled her down the stairs.

“But . . . Narissa . . . I need to tell you something. Something happened! I need to tell you! I—”

“Hush!” answered her friend, covering her mouth. “Whatever it is, you can tell me later. It’s going to start any moment.”

“MmMmMm!”

“Now, move it! Let’s go!”

Chapter 24

Sophie's New Enterprise

It was hard for Sophie to help Jean-Pierre that day. All she could think about was her vision. When the time came to pick up the crystal chalice, she nearly knocked it over. As she tipped it into people's mouths, she'd spill some down their shirts.

"O-o-oops," she said, trembling. "S-s-sorry."

It was even harder at Jonathan and Beth's wedding. Forgetting that she'd volunteered to be the singer, the procession ended up being severely delayed. Any longer, and it might have been cancelled. Fortunately, Narissa found Sophie just in time and hurried her on stage. But as she sang, her voice kept cracking. She stuttered, caught the hiccups and even forgot some of the words. Embarrassed, our heroine pointed to her cup and pretended to giggle, suggesting that it must have been something in Mr. Stanley's famous fruit punch. Everyone listening giggled along with her. But not Narissa. She knew her friend too well. Sophie would never forget the words like that. Not at a wedding. Something had to have been very wrong.

As soon as Sophie was free, Narissa pulled her aside. They went behind the temple and sat in the grass. Sophie told her everything, and Narissa believed every word without question. They agreed she should tell her father and Jean-Pierre right away.

They spent the rest of the afternoon trying to get them together to talk. But with the wedding party, baby shower and anniversary going on, at least one of them was always too busy. Eventually, they realized they'd just have to wait.

The villagers partied late into the night. There were games, prizes and even fireworks. When the music started, all the little boys lined up to ask our heroine for a dance.

But she wasn't in the mood. Narissa grabbed a broom and chased them away.

Of course, the party only really got started when Motumbo arrived, for he was the best dancer of all. Everyone cheered and chanted his name. Wives took turns getting lifted up and spun around by him. The children begged for lessons.

There were many funny songs sung and speeches given. Everyone was falling sideways and backwards in gales of laughter. In her heart, our heroine felt like laughing along with them. But she couldn't. Instead, she kept looking at the clock, praying desperate little prayers under her breath, waiting as patiently as she could for the two men to be free.

Finally, it happened. She saw them sit down to relax. They were even at the same table. Quickly, she dashed over to meet them. "Father!" she cried. "Jean-Pierre! I need to talk to you, right away!" Unfortunately, a dark cloud formed the moment she arrived. Lightning flashed. Thunder covered the sound of her voice. Then it started pouring rain, and the villagers all scattered. She lost Jean-Pierre in the crowd. Standing there soaking wet, she realized she had no choice. She would have to tell them one at a time for now, beginning with her father.

The clock struck midnight when they were finally alone. As usual, they were up way past their bed times in his workshop together. Sophie sat in deep thought, wondering how to begin.

"Everything okay over there?" her father asked, peeking his head up over his science books. "You've been staring out that window for quite some time now. Even on the way home, you were quiet." He closed the books. Then he put them down on his desk. "Something troubling you?"

"I didn't want to tire out Mother more, that's all . . ." she sighed.

"Ah, I see . . ."

Sophie looked back out the window. It was still raining. She could see the candle in her mother's bedroom flickering. Slowly, it was getting dimmer and dimmer. Suddenly, she didn't feel like talking about her vision anymore.

"We didn't have to take the long way home tonight, you know," she continued. "It was pouring. We shouldn't have gone."

"Well," her father answered. "You know how stubborn your mother can be."

"I just don't understand," said Sophie. "We've tried everything. But her illness . . . it keeps getting worse. Every day, she seems to be getting tireder. If you hadn't been there to carry her tonight, she might not have made it back home."

Sophie's father lit his pipe and poured a cup of red wine. He took a puff and sip. Then he leaned back in his chair, removed his glasses and rubbed his eyes.

"Yeah . . ." he sighed sadly. "But there is still hope. I just need a little more time, that's all. Until then, we'll just have to be there to carry her sometimes, won't we?"

Sophie nodded.

Now Sophie was sure she didn't want to talk about her vision, for if she did, she knew she would just start crying. Besides, it was getting late. Her father probably wanted to go to bed soon. She looked down at her feet and frowned. Maybe she should just wait until morning . . .

"I know," said her father, trying to cheer her up. Quickly, he finished his wine and put away his pipe. "Why don't you come over here? I can show you what I've been working on." He sprung out of his chair and threw on his lab coat. But Sophie didn't seem interested.

"I may not have found the cure yet," he continued. "But I've made some very interesting discoveries along the way." Reaching under the table, he pulled out a rack of

test tubes. "The answer, I believe, is in somehow combining these four. The only problem is how . . ." He peeked over again, but she still hadn't moved. "Who knows . . ." he added, "if we put our heads together . . . we might just be able to solve it . . ."

Very, very slowly, reader, our heroine started sagging off her stool. Dragging her feet, she wallowed over, put her elbows on the table and rested her chin on her fists, pouting like a sad, wet puppy.

"That's the spirit," he answered. "Now, take a look at this one . . ."

Her father handed her the first test tube. Inside was a dark blue liquid. The glass was so cold, she could hardly hold it.

"What is it?" she asked, peering inside. But he didn't answer. "Some kind of . . . blueberry slushy?"

"Well, there is only one way to find out."

Sophie looked at him suspiciously and sniffed it. Then she took a small sip. Whatever it was, it tasted just like one. But shortly after, Sophie started to feel odd. A strange sensation fell over her. A shiver went down her spine. She felt cool all over, like she had just jumped into a lake. Yet she was completely dry. The only other time she felt that was when touching a blue crystal. But this was different. It seemed to be spreading throughout her whole body.

"Can you guess the secret ingredient?" her father asked, smiling.

Sophie was so amazed her spectacles nearly flew off her face.

"I say! How did you do that?" she exclaimed. "Somehow . . . you made the crystals digestible!"

"Oh, it wasn't so difficult," her father answered. "A little of this. A sprinkle of that. Counter-reverse the polarities—and voila—you've got yourself a blue crystal potion. Doesn't taste so bad either," he continued, taking a sip

himself. "This will cure sunstroke, heat exhaustion and reduce scarring if you put it on a burn. Not only that, but just one sip will hydrate you for hours."

Sophie felt refreshed and replenished, like she'd just drunk a big glass of cool water. Her father carefully put it back. She couldn't help wondering what the others would do.

"How about this one?" she asked next, picking up the red. It was warm to the touch.

"That cures hypothermia and frostbite."

Sophie sniffed no less cautiously before trying some.

"Why . . . that tastes like . . . apple-cinnamon tea!"

"It was either going to be that or cherry pie," her father replied. "But the cherries didn't fuse well with the red crystals."

He pointed to the corner of the room where there were several vials that looked like they'd exploded. Sophie gulped, feeling grateful she hadn't been there when it happened.

The red potion had the opposite effect from the blue. After drinking some, Sophie felt warm and fuzzy inside—like curling up next to a fireplace on a cold winter's day. It was so delicious that it was hard to stop drinking. But soon she started to sweat. Fanning herself, she quickly handed it back to him.

"And this one?" she asked next, reaching for the yellow. But before she got to it, her father grabbed her wrist.

"Careful—" he said. "That one hasn't been perfected yet."

"What do you mean?" Sophie asked nervously.

Her father picked it up instead. Immediately, static electricity surged through his body. All of the hairs on his head stood up. Our heroine couldn't help giggling.

"You're not going to drink any?" she teased.

"Not at this time of night," he answered.

"Why not?" she asked, peeking inside. "What does it do?"

"Well . . . do you remember the time we ate all those chocolate coffee beans?"

"Yes . . ."

"*That's* what this potion does!"

Sophie giggled some more.

"But it also cures paralysis of a jellyfish sting. A concentrated dose may even be able to restart someone's heart. Zap—just like that." As he said this, some lightning happened to flash outside. The thunder made her jump.

"Eek!"

She huddled close to him.

"But too much," her father chuckled, "will make you dizzy. It's tart and fizzy—a little like lemon soda. But it doesn't have any sugar, so it won't rot your teeth."

He put it down and his hair returned to normal. Lastly, he picked up the green.

"And this one is just for health and healing. One sip is like eating a whole bag of green vegetables. It'll make headaches go away and is a perfect antidote to poisonous snake bites. I haven't chosen a flavor yet," he added, sipping it. "But it's this one that's most promising for your mother."

"They're incredible," Sophie marveled. "Truly . . ."

"I just wish I had more books," he sighed putting it back down. "But with the Dragon King's new laws, it's been impossible to order any. We'll just have to do the best we can with what we have, right?"

Sophie rested her head back on her fists and nodded.

"Besides, we still have time," he continued. "There's all summer. I've added a small laboratory on the ship I've been building. See?" He pulled the blueprint out of his back pocket and pointed to it. "And even if we don't figure it out by then, there is always this winter at our new home."

Her father looked down at Sophie and smiled. But

Sophie didn't smile back. Instead, she seemed to completely lose interest again. She sighed and slowly dragged her feet back to the window.

Our heroine realized she couldn't delay any longer. She had to tell him. He had to know the truth. She only wished it wasn't so hard to say.

"What's wrong, Sophie?" he asked.

Finally, she let it out.

"Father . . ." she said trembling. "There is something . . . I need to tell you."

Feeling very concerned, he reached for his chair and rolled it over to the window where she was standing. He didn't say anything, but just sat down and listened carefully.

"Something . . . happened to me today."

She turned around. Never had he seen her so heart-broken before.

"What happened?" he asked gently.

"Well . . ." she began, lowering her eyes. "On the way to church, I was feeling worried about things. So, I went a little early and talked to Jean-Pierre. I wanted to know what God wanted me to do, and he told me I should just ask Him. So, he took me to the altar and I did."

When Sophie looked up again, she was surprised by the expression on her father's face. Suddenly, he was wild-eyed and completely still. He wasn't blinking or even breathing. The only other time she would see him with that expression was at the end of a science experiment.

"A-a-and?" he stuttered curiously.

"And . . ."

Sophie tried to think of the best way of saying it. But the more she remembered, the more she felt all those tears coming on. So, she decided to just blurt it out before it was too late.

"And . . . I don't think we're going anywhere this fall."

"What do you mean?" His expression changed from curious to confused. "Sophie . . . what did you see?"

"God gave me a vision. He showed me what happens. We don't escape. There is no voyage. The Dragon King burns it all down. He sinks the island into the ocean and captures everyone as slaves! Then . . . he takes over the whole world. The WHOLE world! Unless . . ." Sophie gasped.

"Unless what?"

"Unless . . . I . . . stand up to him."

Slowly, Sophie's father leaned back in his chair. He didn't say anything but just sat there looking confused. Our heroine waited patiently until he was ready to answer.

"Well," he said slowly. "What about me?" He pushed his spectacles back into place. "Was I with you?"

"No. You weren't," Sophie answered. "I didn't see you anywhere. And that's a part of what scares me . . ."

"Oh . . ."

Now he just looked disappointed.

"But I wasn't alone."

"You weren't?"

"There was someone else with me."

"Someone else?"

Sophie nodded. Her father noticed that she didn't look scared anymore either. If anything, she looked relieved.

"Who?" he asked.

"A boy."

"A boy?" he chuckled. Quickly, he thought of all the boys he knew in the village—anyone who could possibly make her feel safe in a situation so dire. But none came to mind. "What boy?" he answered, perplexed.

"I don't know," she shrugged. "But he had a big sword . . . and looked very brave . . ."

"Oh . . ."

Hearing this relieved Sophie's father. He took a deep

breath, stood up and slowly started pacing around the room, thinking.

"Father . . . what are we going to do?" Sophie asked. She got on her tippy toes and peered out the window again. "Should we warn everyone? Should we go looking for this boy? After church, I tried going back and asking God to tell me more. But nothing happened. I don't understand. Why won't He answer? Did I do something wrong?"

"No, no," he replied. "That isn't how it works. You've done everything you need to for now. God told you what He wanted you to know. If He doesn't tell you more, you can be sure there is a reason." As Sophie listened, she couldn't help wondering what that reason might be. "Remember, it's His story you're in, not one of your own." He pointed to all her props, which lay scattered around the workshop. "He is in control. We are merely the actors in it. Sometimes we just need to be patient and give Him time to tell it."

"So, we do nothing then?" Sophie asked.

"No, not nothing."

"Then what?"

"Well," her father answered. "We get ready. The same way we would for any other part we play. Only this is for real. Remember, if this vision is true, then it's a part of what He created you for. He's been preparing you for it ever since you were little. Trust Him . . . keep listening . . . remember your lines. Be watchful for the cues—and when it's your turn to enter the stage, step up. Speak them well. God will be with you."

Sophie nodded, but didn't seem nearly as enthusiastic.

"And what about you . . ." she squeaked, sniffing. "Won't you . . . and Mother be with me?"

They'd always been there for her plays in the past. If not alongside her, they were in the audience watching and

clapping. Her father knelt down in front of her then. He reached out and took her hand.

“We’ll always be with you, Sophie.”

She leaped into his arms and hugged him tightly.

Our heroine went to bed that night feeling like whatever chapter she was in was over. Tomorrow, she would wake up and see what God had planned for her next. She snuggled up to Samson, who was already fast asleep, and blew out the last candle. But just as she was closing her eyes, she heard a terrible sound in the distance. The Dragon King’s war drums started beating. There were battle cries and trumpets. This chapter may have been ending, but another was clearly beginning somewhere else. Quickly, she put her hands together. With all her heart, she prayed that everyone would be safe that night . . . that she would continue getting signs and hints about what to do, and most of all, that wherever that mysterious boy was, God would be helping him get ready too.

Chapter 25

The Sword of the Dragon King

The people of Nibelheim weren't the only ones planning to escape. By then, everyone along the coast was, for the Dragon King's laws had become so strict, you could hardly even breathe without breaking them. Nowhere was this made clearer than in the village of Beville that night.

As usual, he began by sending his dragon. Like a storm, it flew in and wreaked havoc, lighting all the buildings on fire. The smoke that rose from the ashes blinded and choked everyone, causing them to panic and run into the streets. That's when the soldiers poured in.

Choada the troll led the first wave, using his long tongue to snatch anyone who dared to run. Kanga Kang's army followed shortly after. Carefully, he gathered and weighed the booty. Zeetan led his army to the village temple. With his big hammer, he smashed it to pieces and knocked down the statues. The survivors were brought to what was left of the village square. Finally, the Dragon King himself emerged, walking right through the flames, his scary red armor glowing like hot coals.

"WHERE IS HE?" he thundered, glaring at them. "WHERE IS HE?"

But they were all too frightened to answer. Slowly, he took off his helmet, revealing long, greasy black hair and a battle-scarred face. He was missing one eye—as well as many of his teeth. His expression was grim and menacing. "I said . . . where . . . is . . . he?"

No one could decide whether he was scarier with his helmet on or off. He crossed his arms and scanned the crowd. Eventually, he found who he was looking for.

"Look! There he is, m'lord!" said Kanga Kang. The kangaroo pointed to some soldiers coming around a corner, dragging an old man with a long, grey beard. "They



found'm underground! Cheeky buggas! Musta' been hidin'm!"

"Good . . ." sighed the Dragon King, with a most sinister smile. "Bring him to me . . ."

Kanga Kang hopped over to the old man and boxed him in the stomach. "Hass-ah!" Then, he spun around and kicked him. "Hass-ah!" The elder flew forward, landing head first in the mud. The Dragon King pointed and laughed with all his soldiers—"Muah! Hah, hah, hah!"—before beginning what may sound like a familiar speech.



"Liars!" he yelled, raising his arms. "Traitors! Thieves! How dare they break the law! How dare they! We've tried to be nice! We've tried to be patient! Look how we're treated in return!"

The poor people of Beville looked at each other just as confused as everyone else who'd been invaded that week. Laws? They didn't remember breaking any laws.

Only the elder was brave enough to speak up.

"What are you talking about?" he said, coughing up dirt. "What crimes have we committed? There must be some mistake. We haven't done anything!"

Hearing this frustrated the Dragon King. Grumbling, he reached into his armor and pulled out a list.

"Mr. Kang!" he yelled. "Come forward, please! You may do us the honors! Tell them the laws they've broken, so they may know what to beg forgiveness for."

"Aye, m'lord!" the kangaroo answered.

With his great big foot, he kicked the elder in the stomach again, just for the fun of it. "Hass-sah!" Then, he snatched the paper and hopped onto a box. Reaching into his pouch, he took out a clipboard and a pen. "Ahem! Ahem!" He took off his sunglasses and put on his reading glasses. Quickly, someone handed him a megaphone. The villagers felt exactly the way you would if you beheld such a thing, reader. When he was finished clearing his throat, he clenched his fist and screamed. "Ro-ight!"

Everyone listened closely.

"First law brick'n . . ." began the kangaroo. "Stealin' from the government! Second law brick'n . . . preventing an officer from performing his duty! Third law brick'n . . ." He took a deep breath, this time screaming even louder. "Bll-asphemy! Hate speech against our dear leader, and his cause! Fourth law bri—"

But before he could continue, some of the villagers started interrupting.

"Hey! Wait! Wait just a minute!" said one. "We didn't do any of those things!"

"Yeah!" called out another. "We've never stolen from you!"

"You've got the wrong village! We're innocent!"

As they said this, Choadá stepped forward and reached for his whip, for being rude was also against the law. But the Dragon King signaled him to stop just in time.

"It's alright, Mr. Choadá! Let them speak! We believe everyone has the right to a fair trial, don't we?"

The troll nodded and stepped back.

"Continue!" the Dragon King insisted.

But the villagers weren't so sure they wanted to anymore.

"W-w-we s-s-said . . ." they stuttered. "We haven't s-s-stolen anything . . ."

"Y-y-yeah! H-h-honestly! W-w-we haven't!"

"Oh, no?" answered Kanga Kang, hopping back down.

"Then, tell us . . . what do ye call THAT?"

He pointed to a carriage full of vegetables.

"That?"

Kanga nodded.

"Well . . . those are the crops we grow."

"But what's the sign say, wise guy?"

The villager squinted. "Taxes," he answered. "Property of the Dragon King."

"Looks a little light, doesn't it?"

"Well . . ."

Kanga hopped right up to his face and put the megaphone next to his ear.

"Someone's had their DIRTY LITTLE PAWS in there!"

"B-b-but . . . but . . . we've only been keeping what we need to survive. You take too much. Our children are starving. We have no choi—"

"Oi! What was that?" yelled Kanga before the man could finish. "An admission of guilt! You all 'eard it!" He raised up his megaphone and started hopping up and down, excitedly. "GUILTY! GUILTY! GUILTY!"

The soldiers all started cheering along with him.

“GUILTY! GUILTY!”

The villagers couldn’t believe what they were hearing.

“What about interfering with police officers?” another shouted. “We’ve certainly never done that!”

This time, the troll answered. Though, it was very difficult for anyone to understand him.

“Lazz, yo’ honn!” he croaked. “All lazz! Look hee-ah!” He pointed to his wrist, where there was a little scratch. “Jus’ las’ week, one of ‘em rascally motha’s bit meh! Assault! Batt’raw! Breakin’ de law, sah!”

“I knew it!” shouted Kanga, bouncing up and down some more. “Guilty! GUILTY AS CHARGED!”

The soldiers echoed him again.

“GUILTY! GUILTY!”

“But,” the villager pleaded. “That was only because he was coming to kidnap our children! All we did is beg him to stop. You can’t charge a mother for protecting her child . . .”

“What about blasphemy?” another villager asked. “Hate speech? We’ve never said anything hateful to you. This, I’m sure of.”

Quickly, Kanga hopped over to him next and started poking him.

“No! That’s right! Ye don’t! But ye don’t praise him either, do ye?”

“W-w-well . . . I . . . I suppose not.”

“And why is that? Hmm?” He pulled down his reading glasses and glared at him, poking him some more. “Hmm? HMM?”

“W-w-well . . .” The man looked around at all the burned-down buildings, thinking about how they’d been treated all these years. To the villagers, the answer seemed obvious. But to the kangaroo, it clearly wasn’t. “I . . . I . . .”

“MmmHmm . . .” sighed Kanga, scribbling something

down on the piece of paper. "Just as I thought. Ungrateful! Indignant! Hateful! Ye don't even really believe the Gov' 'ere should be king, do ye? In fact . . . it's probably what drove ye to commit the worst crime of all!"

"W-w-what? M-m-me?" asked the villager.

Kanga hopped back onto the box and took his deepest breath yet. Screaming at the top of his lungs, he yelled. "FOURTH LAW BRICK'N . . . mur-der . . . MURDER MOST FOUL!" He pointed to the village graveyard.

"B-b-but . . . b-b-but . . . those are our graves. Your soldiers killed those people. It's YOU . . . who have been murdering US!"

Surely, reader, they couldn't blame that on the villagers too. But once again, they were surprised.

"Yesss . . ." hissed Kanga, disgusted. "But YE MAKE THEM do it, don't ye? Ye . . . with all ye teasin' and mockin'! Bullyin' . . . harassin'm all day long!"

"W-w-what? No, we don't . . ."

"Oh, yes ye do! Just the other day, one of the soldiers saw ye smiling!"

"But . . . we weren't mocking them."

"Well, who were ye mockin' then? Hmm?"

"No one . . ."

"Hah! Ye expect us to believe that?"

"But it's true . . ." squeaked the villager. "Sometimes, we just smile . . . and laugh . . . you know? Our lives are hard . . . but we believe in making the best of things, never giving up and always having hope. So, we do things like sing as we work . . . smile . . . or play with our children. We mean you no harm with it."

"Well, ye DO harm us," said Kanga. "It's enough to make a man SICK. Look—Murph over here has been ill for three days because of it. Haven't ye, Murph?"

"That's right," said the soldier named Murph. "Me losin' me-livelihood! Put that one on the list, Kanga!"

“Ro-ight!”

Now the villagers were just angry, reader. Altogether, they exploded with complaints—shouting, stomping and shaking their fists in defiance. But all it did was make the Dragon King and his army laugh more.

“MUAH, HAH, HAH, HAH! MUAH! HAH! HAH! HAH!”

They loved every minute of it. Clearly, the villagers realized, talking to the Dragon King wasn’t going to solve the problem.

But that’s when everything started to get worse. Amidst the rabble, the Dragon King heard something he didn’t find funny. It was very faint, but it seemed to be coming from somewhere in the back row.

“Yeah, get out of here!” the voice called. “We’re not afraid of you anyway!”

All the laughing immediately stopped, reader. Exploding with rage, the Dragon King started thundering again.

“WHAT? WHO SAID THAT? WHO! SAID! THAT!”

Never had the villagers beheld such fury in a man. Everyone froze again and became dead silent. Eventually, the one who uttered it dared to raise his hand.

“YOU!” the Dragon King screamed, pointing at him. “COME HERE! RIGHT . . . NOW!”

A brave young man made his way to the front of the crowd.

Fearlessly, he walked right up to the Dragon King, crossed his arms and looked him square in the eye.

“Now . . . tell me again,” the Dragon King sighed, cupping his hand over his ear. “What was that you said back there?”

“You heard me!” yelled the man. “I said we’re not afraid! Not of you . . . or your STUPID goons . . .”

"No?" The Dragon King didn't even look mad anymore, only surprised. The villager was short, skinny and poor-looking. He wasn't wearing armor. Nor did he appear to have a weapon. "And why is that, exactly?"

"Because . . ." said the young man, smirking. "Our elder told us there is a God! A God who loves us! A God who is powerful! Way . . . WAY more powerful than you!"

"Really?" asked the Dragon King curiously.

The villager screamed in his face again.

"YES!"

The Dragon King peeked behind the young man, but didn't see anyone. Then he turned and looked behind his army. Again, he didn't see anyone. He gazed up at the clouds and squinted. Still, there was nothing.

"Are you sure about that?" he asked.

The villager nodded.

"Yes, I am! So, you'd all better get out of here RIGHT NOW, before you make Him angry!" He stomped his foot. "THIS is your LAST chance!"

No one expected what happened next, reader. The Dragon King started shaking and quivering. He even looked like he might start crying. The people of Beville were astonished.

"Oh . . ." sighed the warlord. "Oh . . . I see." He hunched over and pouted. "Well . . . if you're sure . . . then I guess that changes things, doesn't it?"

Was that it, reader? Was it over? Some of the villagers started looking hopeful.

"I guess . . ." The Dragon King sniffled, turning around. "We'll all just have to . . . pack up . . . and leave. I guess . . . we'll just . . . have . . . to . . . go back . . . and—"

But as he spoke, the elder noticed him slowly reach for his sword.

"Wait! Look out!" the old man cried. "Get down!"

As quick as lightning, the Dragon King spun around and sliced. The young man's head flew off his shoulders

and landed in the mud. The body fell shortly after. All the villagers gasped in horror.

“Well, would you look at that,” marveled the Dragon King, turning to his army. “I guess he was wrong. BAH! HAH! HAH! HAH!”

For the third time, the army burst into laughter with him. The villagers all started screaming and running.

“Muah! Hah! Hah! Look at them! Scurrying like little mice!” teased one soldier.

“They’re sure scared now!” teased another.

One by one, they caught the villagers and hauled them back. More than anyone, they seemed to enjoy teasing children.

“Rawr! Rawr! Where do you think you’re going, you little brat? RAWR! Looks like God doesn’t love you much after all, does he? HEE! HEE! RAWR! Look what the Dragon King did! He’s going to get your mummy and daddy next! And then YOU! Muah! Hah! Hah! No one can save you now!”

The commotion ended when the Dragon King raised his sword and stabbed it into the ground with a loud crash.

“NOW,” he screamed. “IS THERE ANYONE ELSE? IS THERE ANYONE ELSE WHO BELIEVES IN GOD?”

This time, no one answered, reader. Even the elder was too shocked to speak. All the villagers could do was huddle together helplessly. Watching this put the biggest smile on the Dragon King’s face.

“That’s what I thought.”

He continued his speech. No one dared interrupt him, either.

“You know,” he chuckled. “I am beginning to see I was wrong about you people. You’re not as guilty as I thought. You’ve simply been deceived . . . misled . . . lied to . . . that’s all.” He pointed to the Elder. “By THIS fraud here! Let me guess. He told you that you’re important. He told

you that your pitiful lives have value. There is a god up there, somewhere, who is looking out for you. IS THAT RIGHT?"

The villagers all nodded timidly.

"I thought so! But . . . let me ask you this. If that's true, then where is this god? I mean, has anyone ever really seen him before? Hmm?"

No one had an answer.

"If he's so powerful, then why didn't he stop me back there? Maybe he doesn't love you as much as you think. Maybe he isn't even real. Or . . ." Then the Dragon King suddenly started roaring again. "PERHAPS HE IS AFRAID! JUST LIKE YOU! RAWR! GRAH! BRAW!"

The children in the front row screamed at the top of their lungs. Babies cried. It made the Dragon King laugh even more. "BRAH! HAH! HAH! HAH! HAH!" He drew his sword up again and stared at it, beating his chest. "No, god is not here . . . and if he is . . . clearly, he is on MY side!"

He hopped up onto the box, pushed off Kanga and grabbed the megaphone.

"You want the truth? God hates you! God doesn't care whether you suffer! I know this—because I grew up there, in the wild!" He pointed over the mountains towards the middle of the island. "Starving! Freezing! Fighting every day for my life! You think your lives are hard? Hah! None of you can even imagine what I went through! If any of you had been in my place, you'd be no different than me!"

Many of the villagers didn't know this about the Dragon King, but they knew the dreaded place he was talking about. Some even started feeling a little sorry for him.

"God loves only the strong! He helps only those who help themselves. He favors the bold! The cunning! The ambitious! He gives power and dominion to those who rise

up and seize it! And preserves only those willing to do what is necessary to survive!"

Like a lion, he suddenly pounced down at the villagers. He raised his sword and smashed open one of the boxes of booty. The elder's precious scrolls came tumbling out. Then, he stabbed his blade into the pile, and started dragging it across the village square.

"Now, because I am in such a good mood today," he continued. "I have decided to give you all one last chance. Give up this silly religion. Leave this dreamer behind. Instead, join me. I will rebuild your village, double your rations and let you keep the rest of your precious children. God may not love you, but if you love ME, he will take pity on you. You will be rewarded . . . in this life . . . and any next to come. All you have to do is cross this line . . . get down on your knees . . . say you're sorry . . . and call me king."

The Dragon King waited patiently as the villagers considered his offer. No one wanted to cross, reader. But no one wanted to die either. They looked at their dead friend who was already half-buried in the mud. The mothers crossed first with the children. Then, the young women. Lastly, the men.

"GoOoOod . . ." the Dragon King croaked, patting them on their heads as they passed. "GoOoOod . . ."

Even the elder's son went.

"I'm sorry, Father," he whimpered. "But I'm not going to die for this."

"Adda-boy," said the Dragon King, patting him too. "You've done the right thing. I'm proud of you."

By the end, the old man was the only one left. He sat in the mud, shivering and heart-broken. The Dragon King and his soldiers all laughed at him.

But the Dragon King still wasn't finished, reader. He wouldn't be satisfied until the elder crawled too. It was the only way he could be sure they'd never cross him again.

Little did he know, there was someone else that night who had similar plans.

"Heh, heh, heh . . ." chuckled the Dragon King, stomping his scrolls even deeper into the mud. "Well, old man, it seems you have failed. But . . . I'll tell you what. I'll make you a deal. If you cross too, we will let you live. Come, join your people. Heck, you can even keep this pitiful religion of yours. Really," he laughed like it was cute, "I don't care . . . as long as you cross . . ."

But the elder didn't move. Instead, he closed his eyes, put his hands together and started whispering.

"Hey! Are you listening to me!" growled the Dragon King. "I said cross! No? Alright, so you want to play rough then, do you? Okay, tough guy, how about this?" He turned to the crowd. "If the old man crosses, I will rebuild your village even better than it was . . . triple, instead of double, your rations . . . and return all your precious children. If he doesn't . . . then I'll round them all up . . . and destroy them right in front of you tonight!" Hearing this, the soldiers all drew their weapons. The villagers gasped and panicked. "THERE, IS THAT BETTER? FEEL LIKE CRAWLIN' YET? BRAH! HAH! HAH!" He raised his sword to give the signal. "WELL, WHAT'S IS GONNA BE OLD MAN? HUH? WHAT'S IT GONNA BE?"

It would be the first time in the Dragon King's life that he ever felt scared.

"Hey! What's wrong with you? Are you even listening to me? What are you, deaf? What's that you're whispering? Show you? Show you what? HEY, I'M TALKING TO YOU! ANSWER ME! RIGHT NOW!"

This time, reader, the elder obeyed. But it wasn't in the way the Dragon King expected. Far from begging, crying, bargaining or one last effort to flee, something happened our villain had never seen before.

Suddenly, as if awakening from a dream, the old man's

eyes shot open. He looked at the Dragon King confused, almost as though he'd forgotten he was there. Then he suddenly burst into laughter, like it was the best day of his whole life.

"AH, HAH, HAH, HAH!" he cackled uncontrollably. It was almost like someone was tickling him. "BAH, HAH, HAH, HAH! MUAH! HAH! HAH! HAH!"

Everyone watching was dumbstruck. Especially the Dragon King. If you had seen the look on his face, I am sure you would have started laughing too.

"H-h-hey . . ." the Dragon King mumbled. "Are you crazy? What are you laughing at?"

"You!" answered the elder. He still couldn't stop laughing. "You! Tee, hee, hee! You really think you're going to get away with this, don't you? Bah, hah, hah! You thought God was hard on you as a child. Well . . . JUST WAIT AND SEE WHAT HE'S GOT IN STORE FOR YOU NOW! MUAH! HA! HA! HA!"

"What? God? What are you talking about, old man? Look, I'm right here!" He held up his sword. "If anyone wants to fight me, all they have to do is—"

But the elder interrupted him very rudely.

"Oh, you'd like that wouldn't you, Dragon King? To be the only human who God Himself had to come down to defeat! But we both know that isn't REALLY what scares you. It isn't . . . what would really . . . REALLY HURT!"

It was like there was a whole different person talking, reader. The look on the elder's face was unrecognizable. The rage in his voice and eyes was even scarier than the Dragon King's. Our villain was speechless.

"W-w-who . . . w-w-who . . . who are you people?" was all he could say. He looked down at the scrolls he trampled, wondering what sort of God they believed in. He always thought they worshipped a nice God. But the way the elder was talking now, it was almost as if this God was

even more ferocious than he was. "What do you believe is in store for me?"

"Your worst nightmare, that's what!" the elder cried. Then, he stood up. His chains fell off—which everyone thought was very odd. He hopped up onto a pile of rubble with far more energy than an old man should have and started dancing. "A NEW KING WILL RISE!" he screamed. "SOMEONE EVEN MIGHTIER THAN YOU!"

He pointed at the Dragon King with a sinister grin.

"What? Impossible! No one is mightier than I! I . . . who had no help from God . . ."

"He will come from the same place you did . . . have the same hard life—no, even harder! But instead of being bitter, he will be cheerful and grateful. Instead of being cruel and selfish, he will be sensitive and kind. He will not crave power and riches, but only peace, love and harmony . . ."

Now, the Dragon King was really angry, reader.

"W-w-what?" he stuttered stupidly. "WHAT? No! That's impossible . . . IMPOSSIBLE! No one could be grateful in a place like that! No one nice could survive! RAWR! YOU LIE!"

But the elder just laughed even more.

"Hoo, hoo! Hee, hee! Tee, hee, hee!"

He hopped back down and started prancing right towards the Dragon King, completely unafraid. It was the first time anyone had seen the villain take a step back.

"He will be stronger than you . . . faster than you . . . younger than you. The very soldiers standing behind you now will crawl over your bones to him, begging for mercy!"

The Dragon King glanced at his army and noticed that many of them looked worried. He heard some of them whispering about whether it could be true.

“H-h-hey! Stop it! STOP IT!” he said, shaking. “BE QUIET!”

“Stories will be told about his great feats . . . tee, hee! Statues around the world will be erected in his honor . . . hoo, hoo! While you, with your little sword and pathetic excuses, will be laughed at for all eternity, as nothing more than the FOOL who thought he could rise against God! BAH, HAH, HAH, HAH!”

Finally, the Dragon King lost control— “I SAID BE QUIET!” Fumbling for his sword, he raised it up high and struck.

But he was too late, reader. From that night on, news about the prophecy began to spread like wildfire. Rebelions broke out along the coast! Slaves revolted! Assassinations and spies plagued the halls of his fortress. The Dragon King may have killed the elder, but he never felt like he was truly dead. Sometimes, he swore he could still hear the old man laughing at him. Late at night, he’d awake in a sweat and see him grinning in the shadows.

As for the hero of our story, he was busy getting ready for the long journey ahead of him. Winter was over. His wounds were fully healed. The bones in his limbs had grown thick and strong. Especially the bones in his fists, reader! He could punch right through a slab of stone and not even feel it. Perfect for smashing into bullies’ heads! It was time. He was ready to leave. But could he make it before it was too late? The way was long and treacherous! He had no map, compass or guide to help! Nothing but a restless heart . . . a fool’s hope . . . and a hunch.

\$10

The **EPIC!**
ADVENTURES *of*
PHILIP & SOPHIE
The Sword of the Dragon King

BY DREW ELDRIDGE

*Mighty
heroes!*



DEC.26
2025

**WESTER
TALES**

No 3

Chapter 26

Farewell to the Forest



“Well, do you have everything?” asked Ava.

“I think so,” the boy answered, packing his bag. He stood up and took one last look just to be sure.

The cave was quiet and empty. He’d spent all morning cleaning it, preparing the ground for whoever might move in next. The only thing he couldn’t scrub off were the paintings.

“Take your time,” said Ava, sitting down next to him. “There’s no rush. A part of you is going to miss it here, isn’t it?”

“... Yeah, maybe.”

“Are you sure you don’t want to stay just one more night?”

“No, I’m ready.” He picked up his staff and turned around. “Come on. Let’s go.”

As they ascended onto the terrace, he was surprised to find all his friends waiting for him.

“Look! There he is!” cried Lumpy’s father, getting everyone’s attention. All the Brumbledumb apes started beating their chests. The little ones tossed fresh spring

flowers into the air. "Three cheers for our hero! The one! The only! The Invisible Hand!"

"The Phantom Ape!" tweeted Sebastian, Dorabella and Edward.

"Robbing HoOoOod!" cooed the pigeons.

"BeEeEe-wolf!" buzzed Madame Bee.

Everyone seemed to call him something different.

"Hip, hip, hurray!" they cheered. "Hip, hip, hurray! Hip, hip, hurray!"

"Golly!" the boy gasped with a big smile. "Hi, everyone! It's great to see you!" But, as usual, it took him a long time to catch on. "Wait a minute," he said, looking around, confused. "What are you all doing here?" He drew his staff and got ready to fight. "Is there some kind of trouble?"

Everyone started giggling.

"Trouble?" chuckled Lumpy's father. "Not anymore. Thanks to you, the forest is peaceful!"

"We've come to say goodbye!" cheered Mrs. Butterfly.

"Yeah," croaked old Mr. Turtle. "You slow or something?"

"Really?" our hero gasped. Everyone nodded. "But . . . how did you know I was leaving?"

The animals all looked at Ava.

"I told them," she answered.

"YOU invited them here?"

Now he began to wonder if he were dreaming. Ava never did things like that. She hated his friends. Even more, she hated parties.

"Sure," she shrugged. "Hey! Why are you all looking at me like that? So, I wanted to surprise him! You got a problem with that or something!?"

"Oh, Ava!" said the boy, his eyes filling with tears of joy. "It's perfect! The best surprise ever! Thank you!"

He reached out and hugged her tightly.

"Ugh! Yuck! Get off me!"

Everyone lined up and took turns thanking the boy, often giving him presents and asking questions about his journey.

"So, where are you going?" asked Dorabella, dropping some seeds in his palm.

"I'm not sure," he answered, petting her.

"Do you think it will be dangerous?"

"Maybe."

"What do you think you'll find?" asked Mr. Squirrel next. Out of his cheeks, he pulled two peanuts.

The boy shrugged.

"I don't know."

"What if you don't find anything?" asked Edward, giving a worm.

The boy thought about it. Though not for too long.

"Hmm . . . I'm not sure. I guess I'll just have to keep looking, won't I?"

Then young Sebastian flew down. He landed right on the boy's shoulder, carrying a lot more than just one gift. In a leaf, he'd bundled all his most precious possessions: a walnut, some cherries and a twig shaped like a spear. It all tumbled out, making a great big mess.

"HELLO!" he exclaimed, interrupting his brother and pushing him aside. "Ahem! Allow me to introduce myself! My name is Sebastian Ploomberry! And I am your BIGGEST FAN!"

"Hi! Pleased to meet you."

"I SAW YOU FIGHT A HUNDRED APES!"

"A hundred?"

"It was magnificent! The way you zigged! The way you zagged! The way you pounded their big, fat heads. Pow! Pow! POW!"

"Well, I couldn't have done it without your help."

"You mean . . . YOU REMEMBER THAT?"

"Mmmhmm! It was very brave of you."

The biggest smile spread across Sebastian's face.

"Oh," he couldn't help asking. "Can I please come with you on your next adventure? Please! PLEASE!"

"Well . . ." The boy looked at Dorabella, who seemed worried. "Maybe next time."

"Aww!"

"But I'll tell you what. How about you take this?" The boy raised his staff and drove it into the ground. "You can guard it for me while I'm gone."

The little bird's eyes lit up.

"Wow! Your stinger? Really?" He flew up and proudly perched himself upon it. "OKAY!"

"Keep it safe, now. I'm counting on you."

Sebastian puffed up his feathers and stood tall.

"I will!" he promised. "If anyone even looks at it, I shall peck their eyes out! If anyone touches it, I'll go to the bathroom on their head!"

"Thanks," the boy replied, gently stroking him.

When the animals were finally finished, Ava started nudging the boy.

"It's time," she whispered.

Hopping onto a rock, he addressed all of them at once.

"Well," he announced. "I better get going. Thanks again for coming, everyone! It means a lot to me. Good-bye! I'll miss you!"

The animals all cheered one last time.

"WeEeEe'll miss you too! Snort, snort!"

"Wisely and slow now, sonny!"

"Farewell, neighHhHhbor!"

"BeEeEe careful!"

"Avoir un rafale, monsieur!"

"See you later, alligator!"

"Brekekekex! Koax! Koax!"

"Ooh Ahh! Ooh Ahh!"

Waving, our hero and his companion turned toward the sun and began their journey. The first stop would be the Wood of the Willows.

"Golly, it sure was fun seeing everyone again," sighed the boy, kneeling down on the mossy forest floor. He realized he needed a new spear. "I hope they'll be safe while I'm gone."

"You mean, you really plan on returning?" asked Ava.

"I'd like to." When he found the right stick, he began sharpening the end. "Just to visit . . . check up on things."

"You really do love them, don't you?"

"Of course."

The boy stood up. He gave his new weapon a few test swings. "Hi-ya! Hi-ya!" It was even better than his last one. "HI-YA!" With hardly any effort, he pierced it right through an old tree stump. "Wow! Did you see that? Now THAT'S a strong stick!"

Ava rolled her eyes.

"Don't you get it?" she sighed. "It isn't the stick. It's you. You're stronger now. Much stronger. I can tell."

"Really?"

Then something else caught his attention.

"Hey, wait a minute . . . didn't this stump used to be taller? He crouched down and patted around the base for quicksand. "Hmm . . . maybe it's sinking."

"It's called a growth spurt, genius," she answered. "The stump isn't shorter. You're taller."

He looked up, trying to see the top of his head, but couldn't. So he went to a tree instead. He made a little mark on it and stepped back.

"You know what? I think you're right!"

All of it made him wonder what else had changed. Gripping his spear, he felt like seeing how far he could throw it.

"There will be plenty of time for that later," said Ava. "Do not think our journey will be easy. Many new foes await us. You can test your new skills out then. For now, let's focus on moving."

"Right!"

The Wood of the Willows was silent and peaceful, a place so dreamy that even the birds couldn't help whispering. You could hear the sound of a stream a mile away and rarely came upon a spot that wasn't perfect for a nap. As the boy and Ava walked, they remembered all the fun times they had together.

"Hey, isn't this the first place you took me exploring? Look, there's the first tree I climbed! And over there! The first time I tasted blueberries!"

Of course, Ava's idea of fun had always been very different from his.

"And there was the first beating I gave you! And there was where you got your first scar! Aw, look!" she sighed sweetly. "The first tooth I knocked out. You can still see the blood."

The boy didn't recall those memories nearly as fondly as she did, but couldn't help laughing along with her.

Soon, they came to the old obstacle course she had made for him. Just for fun, he ran it again. Proudly, Ava watched as he bounded over every pit, rolled under every log and smashed through every barrier. He found his old boomerang and slingshot. Even more memories came flooding back. All those hours he'd spent practicing! All those disastrous experiments! All those frustrating disappointments and failures until he'd finally succeeded! How wildly he remembered celebrating! However, there was one memory that made him happier than all the others. Stopping at a spring, he suddenly heard a familiar voice call from the bushes.

"Excuse me," it said, softly.

A pretty doe emerged, batting her eyelashes.

Too stunned by her beauty to respond, all he could do was sit there, gazing at her.

"Hey," whispered Ava, nudging him. "Who is that? One of your friends? I don't remember her."

"I'm not sure."

At first, the boy didn't recognize her. But the closer he looked, the more familiar she seemed.

"Sorry, do I know you?"

Her voice sounded even more familiar.

"You weren't going to leave without saying goodbye to me, were you?" she giggled. "Don't you remember? Well, I suppose it's been quite a long time since you saw me. I was only a fawn . . ."

Suddenly, it started to drizzle rain. Far in the distance, he heard thunder gently rumbling. What remained of the sunlight gleamed on her pretty coat. She smiled and, like a flood, it all came back to him.

"W-w-wait . . . wait!" he cried, excitedly. "Is it . . . is it really you?"

The doe batted her eyelashes and giggled some more.

"Yes. It's me. I just wanted to come wish you farewell on your journey . . . and to thank you one last time for saving me all those years ago." Then, after one last giggle, she bounded away into the mist where two fawns of her own were waiting for her.

"Who was that?" asked Ava. "Saving her? I don't remember that. Hey, are you listening?" He stared dreamily as the happy family frolicked away together. "Hello?"

"No, I don't think you would," he finally responded. "You weren't there. It happened the night before I told you I was going to be the forest guardian. She was the first one I rescued."

"I don't believe I've heard that story."

"I guess I forgot to tell you."

"Well, we've got a very long journey ahead of us. So, you can tell it to me now."

Chapter 27

The Legend of the First Labor

"The way I remember it," began Ava, "it was like you'd been hit on the head and suddenly forgot all I'd taught you."

"Well—in a way, that *is* what happened . . ."

"All that work teaching you to be selfish, and you chose the opposite."

"I told you—I didn't choose it. It chose me."

"What did?"

"I don't know what. All I knew was that it was my purpose . . . what I am . . . what I was meant for."

"Well, whatever it was, it certainly wasn't me who gave you that idea."

"In a way, I think you did. Not on purpose, of course. But now that I think about it, I'm not sure it's a path I would have chosen if it weren't for you."

"Now, you have some explaining to do . . ."

"Look, do you remember my first day of training, the morning after I crawled from the cave?"

"How could I forget? You were so pathetic."

"I didn't want to protect anyone then. I didn't even really want to protect myself. But I learned something that day. Something that stayed with me ever since. You may not have been trying to turn me into the forest guardian, but from the very beginning everything you did was preparing me for it."

"Attention!" he remembered Ava screaming at him, waking him from his pool of strawberries. Her voice sounded quite a bit younger back then and her fur had much less grey in it. "Now that you're out of the cave, it's time to begin your training. Sit up!" she said, dragging him across the terrace.

"EeEek!" squeaked the boy.

"Open your eyes! Behold, young one, the world you will one day conquer."

"Wow! It's so pretty!" The boy couldn't quite talk yet, reader. But this is what he was trying to say. "Amazing!" His little eyes filled with wonder as he reached out. "I want to look at it!" he babbled. "I want to touch it! I wonder how it tastes!" Whatever the big furry creature's 'lessons' were, reader, they could wait. This was far more important to him! Little did he know, however, the first lesson had already begun.

"I'm going to go explore it!" he declared.

"Good idea," replied Ava.

Following the scent of flowers and strawberries, he started crawling—delighting in the way the soft, dewy grass brushed against his fingers. But suddenly the grass ended. He came to a steep, rocky hill.

"EeEek!" he squeaked again, nearly falling off. He looked down, where everything he smelled was laid out in the prettiest of meadows. He tried to reach out and pull it forward, but it was too far. Then he tried yelling "come up here!" But that didn't work either.

"Problem?" asked Ava sweetly.

He pointed. "What's . . . down . . . there?"

"I don't know," she answered. She came a little closer and sat next to him. "Why don't you go find out?"

"It looks dangerous." He peeked over again and gulped. Then he looked up at her. "Is it?"

But Ava just shrugged.

"Maybe . . . but on the other hand, maybe not."

He crawled a little further and glanced back up at Ava, seeing if she looked worried. But she showed no signs of it. He asked one more time.

"Safe?"

Ava shrugged again—and then nodded.

"Really?"

"Yes . . ."

And now you see, reader, why it had to be a wolf who raised our hero. No human mother could have done such a thing! Exactly what you should never say to a baby or let them do, Ava encouraged. The boy listened, crawled forward and, just as you would expect, after a few steps fell down the rocky hill—“EeEek! Oof! OOF! OOF! OOF!”—bruising just about every muscle in his body as well as skinning all his knees and elbows. Naturally, as babies do, he broke into a wail of tears and called up to her for help. “OwWw! Help! Wah! Help! HELP!” But no help came. Instead, all Ava did was laugh.

“BAH! HAH! HAH! HAH! Oh my! That was precious! Good fall!” She hopped halfway down so he could hear her better through all his crying. “Lesson number one: be careful! Always mind your surroundings. Not everything is as it seems.”

“But you said—Wah! Wah!—it wasn’t dangerous! Wah!”

“Lesson number two: everything is dangerous. The world is a brutal, hostile place. Always assume the worst. Expect the unexpected.”

“But YOU said it wasn’t!”

“I lied.”

“You what!?”

“And that’s lesson number three: don’t trust others.”

“... Not even you?”

A sinister grin spread across Ava’s face.

“Especially not me.”

What a frightening, terrible world this was, our hero began to think. No sooner had he stepped out of his cave than he wanted to turn back. But there was no going back now. Looking around for a path up and finding none, he started to panic.

“Help! Help! Get me out of here!” he cried, trying to stand, but failing. “Oof! Help! Help! Wah! Out! I want out!”

"Out?" laughed Ava some more. "There is no 'out,' child. You are out."

"But I don't like that!"

"It doesn't matter whether you like it. And that's lesson number four. The world is the way it is. Don't like it? Too bad."

"But . . . but . . ." Unfortunately, hearing this only upset the boy more. "WAH!" Which only made Ava laugh more.

"Muah! Hah! Hah! MUAH! HAH! HAH! HAH!"

It was terrible, reader. He was trapped. Even worse, trapped with a complete psychopath. Even when he begged and pleaded, she laughed. He looked up at the birds and cried for help. He looked at the rocks. He called out to the heavens. No help whatsoever came.

"I wouldn't keep doing that if I were you," Ava finally said to him, noticing some rustling in the bushes.

"Wah! Wahn! Why not? Wahn!"

"Because . . . someone might hear you."

"Wah! So what? Wahn!"

"Fine," she shrugged. "Suit yourself."

Then the bushes started shaking. That got his attention. Next, he heard deep, heavy breathing and a growl.

"Eek! What's that?"

"Something small, cute and cuddly."

"Really? That's a relief," he was about to answer. But then he remembered the last time she gave him advice. "Wait! No! You're lying again, aren't you?"

"Good, you're catching on."

The bushes opened. Out jumped a young, wild piglet. It had big teeth and two sharp tusks with blood on them.

"Agh! Help! Help! Please!" he cried, trying to climb back up again.

"Nope. I told you—you're on your own. This is your training, remember?"

The beast started growling and drawing nearer.

“RrRrRr! RrRrRr! Ruff!”

“Agh! But what do I do?”

“Figure it out,” she replied. “What do your instincts tell you when you see another animal?”

“I don’t know. Invite them to play?”

“No.”

“Eat strawberries together?”

“Wrong again. Look out . . . he’s coming.”

“Agh!”

This is how our hero learned how to walk and run, reader. As you can imagine, he got good at it much quicker than most other babies.

“AaAaAagh!”

“RrRrRr! RrRrRr! Ruff!”

“Ouch!”

“RrRrRr! RrRrRr! Ruff!”

“EeEek!”

“Good form!” said Ava, cheering him on. “See, you’re getting the hang of it. One foot in front of the other. One, two! One, two! One, two! MUAH, HAH! HAH! HAH!”

By the end, his behind was so blue with bruises, he could barely crawl. The little boar then jumped on top of him, trying to bite his neck. Surely, he thought as he grappled with it, Ava would come to his aid now. But she didn’t.

“Did you not hear me?” she reminded him. “I said you’re alone. Now, unless you’re not finished whining and complaining, why don’t you try something else?”

“Something else? Like what?”

“You know what! The cave! Remember the cave! That bat! Do you remember? I do! You’re a killer, kid. A natural! I’ve seen it. All you have to do is release it. Do it! Now! Kill! Kill! KILL!”

The boy’s blood started to boil. He clenched his fists. “Grr!” he growled.

“That’s it!”

“Grr! Hiii-ya!”

“Yes! YES! You’re doing it! Bite! Scratch! Jam that finger into his eye, kid. Woo! Hoo! He didn’t like that much, did he? Serves him right. Look, it’s working! He’s relenting! Retreating! Running away like a stinking coward. You see? You can do it!”

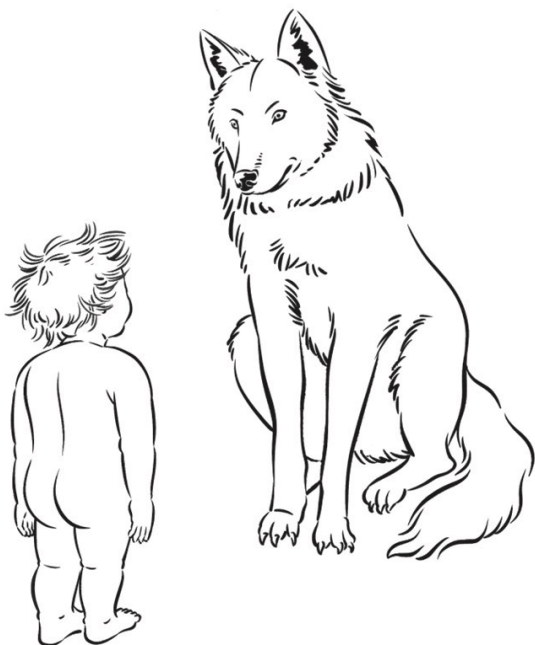
“OoOoOo . . .” the boy groaned. “OoOoOo . . .”

“Let that be lesson number seven. No whining or crying! If you whine, your enemies will dine. If you cry . . . you die. Got it?”

“OoOoOo . . .” he continued. “Yeah . . . I think so . . .”

“Good!” sighed Ava, sweetly. “Now, get up! I said GET UP! On your feet, soldier!” She hopped down and kicked him in the ribs. “ON YOUR FEET!”

“OoOoOo . . . OoOo-kay . . .” Slowly, he rose.



"Now, let's have a look at this ridiculous body of yours." He stood with his hands at his side as she encircled him. "Stand up straight! Shoulders back! Quit wobbling! Close your mouth! Stop blinking so much! Suck in that gut! Remarkable . . . truly remarkable! It's even worse than I feared. Look at those twiggy little arms! Those chicken legs! That melon head! No fangs . . . no claws . . . no fur. And—wait a minute," she stammered, pausing as she looked between his thighs. "WHAT IN THE HELL IS THAT!?"

"Hmm?" he answered timidly, glancing down.

"Oh . . . umm . . . well . . . that's my . . . my . . . my . . ."

"I KNOW WHAT IT IS," she roared in his face. "I MEAN, WHAT'S IT DOING THERE? YOUR MOST VULNERABLE PART—OUT IN FRONT OF YOU FOR ALL TO SEE!"

"I don't know," the boy shrugged. "I didn't put it there . . ."

"Well, get it out of my face OR I'LL BITE IT OFF!"

"Eek!"

He ran to the bushes and grabbed a leaf to cover himself with. But she still wasn't finished.

"Hah! Hah! Hah! Look at you trembling there. Maybe you're right, and I shouldn't train you. Maybe I should just eat you or leave you here for someone else."

She drew his attention to some of the other animals watching, hungrily licking their lips. The only reason they hadn't attacked yet was because of Ava.

"Eek! No, please don't!"

"Why not?"

"Because—I'll do anything you say! I'll try harder! I promise!"

"Then you'll be obedient from now on?"

"Yes!"

"Yes, what?"

"Yes, ma'am?"

"Save the ma'am for your mother. You will address me as commander."

"Yes, commander!"

"You won't talk back when I call you names?"

"No."

"No, what?"

"No, commander."

"You won't whine and complain?"

"No, commander."

"You'll follow the rules?"

"Yes, commander."

Ava walked closer and glared at him.

"You know, it's no wonder you were left in the snow. Who could ever love something so ugly and worthless?" The boy lowered his eyes and started sniffing. "Aw, what's wrong? You going to cry again, cry baby? That was fast . . ."

"No . . ." he squeaked, wiping away his tears.

"Good . . . because if I EVER hear you cry or whine, or mope, or complain—you're on your own! If words are enough to defeat you, you don't stand a chance against a real attack."

"I won't!" he promised.

"And if I ever see you flee from battle again—I'll kill you myself. Understand?"

". . . Okay."

"I said, do you understand?"

"Yes . . . commander."

"Good," she answered, finally speaking gently again.

"So . . . what's the next lesson then?" he ventured.

But the boy soon learned that when Ava spoke gently—or smiled—it usually meant something even worse was about to happen.

"Funny you should ask . . ."

Such was the beginning of our hero's childhood, reader. And it only got harder and harder. Ava's schooling

was treacherous—lessons with titles like “101 ways to fall down a hill,” “ring around a rosebush,” “capture the stag” and, her personal favorite, “how to take a beating.”

“Oof! Oof! Oof!” he’d mutter as she sat on top of him, pounding his head. “Oof! I . . . don’t think—Oof!—I understand the—Oof!—point of this lesson—Oof!”

“You’re not supposed to. Now hold still!”

“Oof! Oof! Are you sure—Oof!—it’s working?”

“Yes. Now, QUIET! No talking!”

“Okay . . . Oof! Oof! Oof!”

“Life is war,” she’d yell down at him as he crawled through her obstacle courses in the rain. “The objective of war is survival! To survive, you must be strong! To be strong, you must suffer! To suffer willingly, you must overcome your fear of pain! To overcome your fear of pain, you must become accustomed to pain! To become accustomed to pain, you must experience pain! Lots of pain! That’s where I come in.

“As your teacher, it is my job to accustom you to pain. From here on out, you will never know comfort. Your body will always be bruised. Your elbows and knees, always skinned. You’ll never walk without a limp or see out of both eyes. There will be much blood. And just when you begin to heal and think the pain is finally gone, more and more will come. You will experience pain until you learn to forget pain. Only then will you be ready for the next lesson—fear!

“A creature is only as courageous as when it is terrified . . . only as strong as when it’s disadvantaged . . . only as wise as when its senses are dazzled or shrouded in darkness! Everyone has a plan until they get punched, robbed, wounded, stranded . . . until they are starving, desperate . . . hunted. If you don’t know what to do under such circumstances, you know nothing of value out here. If you cannot make yourself useful when all you have is yourself, you are useless.

“Make no mistake, young one, I did not take you in out of charity. I don’t love you. I don’t care about your ‘feelings.’ I’m not your ‘ma-ma’ or ‘da-da.’ I took you in to make a soldier of you. You’re an object . . . a tool . . . a means to an end. I’m building a killing machine. If you can’t fulfill this function, then you’re expendable.

“Do not think this path will lead to your happiness. It will not lead to happiness, but to unhappiness. Joy, peace, prosperity . . . a good long life—and all that other nonsense—these are things you’re going to have to let go of. I cannot give you these things. I wouldn’t know how to give you these things. And even if I did know how, I wouldn’t because, quite frankly, you don’t deserve it. But what I can give you . . . what I do know . . . what I can promise you . . . if you’re willing to stick around . . . if you let go, and embrace the way of the wolf . . . is something far greater: POWER!

“What others believe is impossible, YOU will achieve! Where others fail, YOU will succeed! Your desires, you will MAKE realities. And when you are met with an obstacle—be it an army . . . a barrier . . . even a dragon—instead of crying or curling into a ball, like all the others, YOU will RISE UP, CHARGE FORTH, make that fist of yours and SMASH THROUGH IT!

“But I can only give you the knowledge. You need to be willing to receive it. I can only show you the way. You need to be willing to walk it. Are you ready, child? Are you up for the challenge? The choice is yours . . .”

End of Preview

About the Author

Drew Eldridge is a tutor from Winnipeg, Manitoba. He has a Bachelor of Arts Degree, majoring in English from the University of Winnipeg, specializing in Young People's Texts and Cultures.



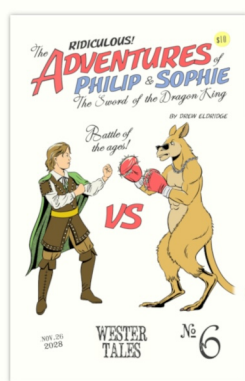
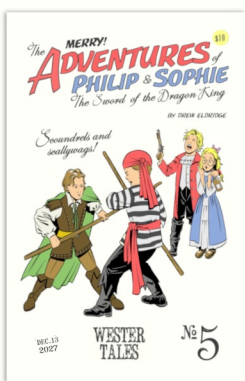
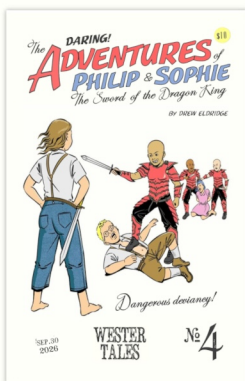
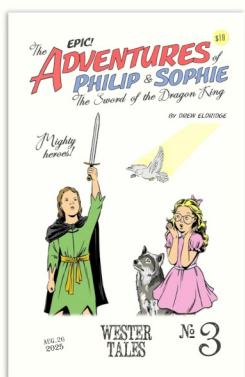
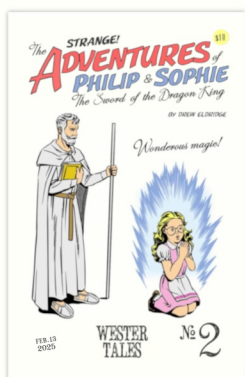
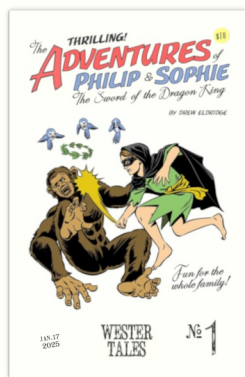
Acknowledgements

Thank you to my family and friends for supporting one of my great passions in life. Special thanks to my illustrator for helping make my story come alive. I would also like to thank my wife, Lorelee, for helping with revisions and Lori Brammall for reviewing the first and second drafts.

To download the free ebook, visit:

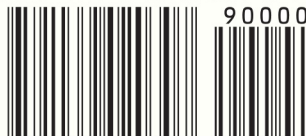
www.westertales.com

The adventure continues!



AND MANY MORE!

ISBN 978-1-0690203-0-7



9 781069 020307